

The Arab Spring: Remembering Ibn Khaldun's Notion of "Asabiyah"*

Arap Baharı: İbn Haldun'un "Asabiyet" Teorisini Yeniden Düşünmek

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Abstract: When one looks at Ibn Khaldun's works and its relevance to the world we inhabit, his notion of 'Asabiyah' must be taken as a very significant theory that can be used to analyze our current situations. The notion of 'Asabiyah' or social cohesion is one of the paramount ideas in the works of Ibn Khaldun and the pivotal one through which the society can be understood from Khaldunian perspective. Furthermore, for Ibn Khaldun, 'Asabiyah' is the first principle for a well organized society and it is what unites the society together through a common language, customs and common ways of life and purposes. Thus, and from Ibn Khaldun prism, the integrity of any society is fused and connected with the level of its 'Asabiyah'. Hence, this paper tries to investigate the real causes behind the Arab Spring using Ibn Khaldun's notion of 'Asabiyah'. More significantly, it endeavors to divulge the fact that Ibn Khaldun's theory is still applicable on our current situations in the Arab and Muslim world and even beyond.

Keywords: Ibn Khaldun, Arab Spring, Notion of Asabiyah

Öz: İbn Haldun'un eserleri ve şu anki dünya ile alakası ele alındığında, "Asabiyet" kavramı içinde bulunduğumuz durumu analiz etmede önemli bir teori olarak karşımıza çıkar. "Asabiyet" ya da sosyal uyum kavramı İbn Haldun'un eserlerindeki en önemli fikirlerden biri ve toplumun İbn Haldun'cu perspektiften anlaşılabilmesi için en önemli fikirlerden biridir. Dahası, İbn Haldun için "Asabiyet" iyi organize olmuş bir toplumun ilk prensibidir ve ortak bir dil, gelenekler, ortak yaşam biçimleri ve amaçları aracılığıyla toplumu bir araya getiren umdedir. Böylece, İbn Haldun açısından, herhangi bir toplumun bütünlüğü onun "Asabiyet" seviyesi ile birleşik ve bağlantılıdır. Bu nedenle bu makale, İbn Haldun'un "Asabiyet" kavramını kullanarak Arap Baharı'nın arkasındaki gerçek nedenleri ele almaya çalışmaktadır. Daha da önemlisi, İbn Haldun'un teorisinin Arap ve Müslüman dünyasındaki ve hatta ötesindeki mevcut durum üzerinde hala geçerli olduğu gerçeğini ortaya koymaya çalışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İbn Haldun, Arap Baharı, Asabiyet Teorisi

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Introduction

This article is entitled *The Arab Spring: Remembering Ibn Khaldun's Notion of Asabiyah*. In this article an attempt is made to envision our current situations—particularly in the Arab world—using Ibn Khaldun's theory of *Asabiyah*. Consequently, and as I have argued before, it's undeniable that when one looks at Ibn Khaldun's works and its relevance to the world we inhabit, his notion of '*Asabiyah*' must be taken as a very significant theory that can be used to analyze our current situations. The notion of '*Asabiyah*' or social cohesion is one of the paramount ideas in the works of Ibn Khaldun and the pivotal one through which the society can be understood from Khaldunian perspective. Furthermore, for Ibn Khaldun, '*Asabiyah*' is the first principle for a well organized society and it is what unites the society together through a common language, customs and common ways of life and purposes.

Thus, and from Ibn Khaldun's prism, the integrity of any society is fused and connected with the level of its '*Asabiyah*'. Hence, this paper tries to investigate the real causes behind the Arab Spring using Ibn Khaldun's notion of '*Asabiyah*'. More significantly, it endeavors to divulge the fact that Ibn Khaldun's theory is still applicable on our current situations in the Arab and Muslim world and even beyond.

However, and before delving into the implementation and applicability of Ibn Khaldun's notion of *Asabiyah* on the Arab Spring, I would like to speak about this notion of *Asabiyah* in his Introduction or *Muqadummat* where he tried to show us the mechanisms through which nations rise to power and what may cause their decline and how the idea of *Asabiyah* fits into that discourse. Of course, this idea of the rise and fall of nations is the crux of Ibn Khaldun's Introduction. Furthermore, and in his Introduction or *Muqadummat*, Ibn Khaldun spoke thoroughly on the idea of *Asabiyah* and its significance in having a harmonious and peaceful society. He argued that strong civilization needs the construction of the idea of *Asabiyah*. According to his Introduction, *Asabiyah* or social solidarity or „*esprit de corp*“ can be broadly defined as the state of mind that makes individuals to identify with a group and subordinate their own personal interests to the group interests.” (Ibn Khaldun 1995, cited in Wajdi Dusuki, 2006)

Arguably, and through this definition one can say that Ibn Khaldun wants to postulate that humanities is all about cooperation and helping one another. Nevertheless, and because of some other worldly drives, individuals may divert and abandon that sense of cooperation and start looking for their own interests, which will undermine the interest of the group and the society at large. As result, Ibn Khaldun argued that this idea of *Asabiyah*

or social solidarity is stronger in the nomadic tribes, and this of course as he said is due to the fact that those nomadic people are very simple and do not seek to have luxurious life, which is different from those who live in cities where luxury is part and parcel of their lives and they can do anything in order to attain it. However, and from Ibn Khaldun's point of view, peoples' morality can be damaged especially in places where luxury is highly demanded. Ibn Khaldun added:

Immorality, wrongdoings, insincerity and trickery, for the purpose of making a living in a proper or an improper manner, increase among them. 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. (Ibn Khaldun, 1995, p.293)

Hence, and through this quote, one can fathom the importance of Asabiyah in any society. For Ibn Khaldun, it is vital to inspire and instill this idea of Asabiyah in the way people think in order to keep them together, and more importantly to keep them far from what may damage their social solidarity. This comes from the fact that self-interest may lead the individuals to use all the means and ruses to obtain the luxury, and this in turn has a deleterious effect on the idea of Asabiyah or social solidarity. From vantage point of Ibn Khaldun, the misuse of power and the idea of the leaders' self-enrichment that is rampant in today's politics and particularly in the Arab world is what damaged and broke the notion of Asabiyah theorized by Ibn Khaldun in his Introduction. (Ahmed, 2002)

For instance, the Arab Spring can be seen as an upshot of the collapse of what Ibn Khaldun labeled as 'Asabiyah' or the social cohesion enacted by those Arab leaders who failed to have harmonious societies with common purposes. As a result, the lack of 'Asabiyah' has led to some abnormal behaviors, and this in turn has generated a mess in the social orders and structures as it has been seen in some Arab countries which have undergone this experience. To put it crudely, the Arab Spring can be viewed as a breakdown in what Ibn Khaldun called 'Asabiyah' as a result of many factors, such as the gap between the rich and the poor, embezzlement, nepotism, corruption, the mismanagement of the rulers and more importantly the large percentage of jobless young people. All these factors have greatly damaged the idea of 'Asabiyah', and therefore the social change was inevitable.

Significantly, what makes Ibn Khaldun's theory applicable on what is taking place in some Arab countries is the fact that his Introduction explains the ways through which one can understand his or her society, and more importantly predict some other insights that may lead to some considerable social changes. As a result, and from Ibn Khaldun's point of

view, what are the insights that helped or nurtured the uprising in these Arab countries, such as Tunisia and Egypt? And more importantly, what are the main reasons that lead to the downfall of the Arab leaders?

To start with Tunisia which happened to be the birth place of Ibn Khaldun and the starting point of this Arab Spring; the insights that lead to the uprising were very clear from the first days of Tunisian revolution whom Mohammed Bouazizi was very signatory and who can even be seen as the fuel of the engine that drove the country to that social change. More importantly, the death of Mr. Bouazizi the unemployed man who lived in Sidi Bouzid must be taken as very influential in the process of social changes in Tunisia. Bouazizi, the young man has ignited himself after having his cart and wares confiscated by a policewoman who slapped him saying that Bouazizi does not have a legal permission for his wares. Then, Mohammed Bouazizi was taken to the hospital, but whole medical treatments that he received could not prevent him from death since the whole body was lit and died several weeks later in a terrible coma. Thus, his death has generated and triggered a lot of anger and resentment in the victim's place of birth, Sidi Bouzid and in Tunisian as whole and in turn has gained international attention.

Significantly, and immediately after his death the country has lived in a turbulent moment and demonstrations were rambling everywhere in Tunisia that were impossible to curb, which lead the country to a state of turmoil and convulsion. More importantly, all these demonstrations were resulted from Bouazizi's death which shows a sort of solidarity with him and this is the point where Ibn Khaldun's theory and notably the notion of Asabiyah is very much relevant to case of Tunisia. For instance, most of young graduates and unemployed took Bouazizi as a person who shares common profile and status with them and this was the backbone or the main reason that led to that strong social cohesion or Asabiyah that forced the former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to leave the country. Additionally, and at the very beginning of the uprising one can see the fact that some of the protesters, especially the graduates have used the phrase 'we are all Muhammed Bouazizi' which is very interesting when we speak about the idea of Asabiyah invoked by Ibn Khaldun.

Additionally, Ibn Khaldun's notion of Asabiyah or group feeling can be seen in Egypt which is the second place to witness the Arab Spring, and it happened to be the place where Ibn Khaldun died. Of course, the uprising in Egypt is indebted to the Tunisian experience which inspired Egyptians. Hence, 25 January was a remarkable day in Egyptian history since it is the day that the protests in Egypt have started demanding the end to President Hosni Mubarak's reign. Ironically, the protesters started in a national day honoring the

national security is very much significant since it may echo or express their antipathy with the regime and their fury of what is taking place in the country.

But, the death of Khaled Said, the young man who was tortured in Alexandria has its own share in Egyptian revolution. This emanates from the fact that his death has generated a kind of group feeling or Asabiyah among young people in Egypt and by enlarge all Egyptians. However, the real solidarity or group feeling was shown in Tahrir Squares where protesters were sharing everything, such as distributing food and water at the rally sites and caring about each other. The reciprocity produced by the demonstrators in Tahrir Squares was the seed of their Asabiyah and by extension the root of the success of their revolution. So, to argue backward, Ibn Khaldun's notion of Asabiyah or group solidarity is very pertinent to these two experiences where the protesters were the real heroes and their Asabiyah was unbreakable despite some attempts by Hosni Mubarak's acolytes to hash the protesters.

Hence, and in the case of Egypt, Khaled Said can be put in an analogy with Muhammad Bouazizi, the young man whose self-immolation helped in the removal of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Thus, if Bouazizi has helped Tunisian; Khaled Said has his own contribution to the end of Hosni Mubarak's reign. Thanks to people's solidarity in the Tahrir Squares and Ibn Khaldun's theory which predicts the decline of this kind of leaders.

Clearly, what was completely out of sight for both Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak and their governments is the fact that these young peoples, be it Tunisian demonstrators and the supporters of Bouazizi or the Egyptian protesters and partisans of Khaled Said, is that these people are Arabs living together, and therefore, they share the same language and culture. This has developed what Ibn Khaldun has called the Asabiyah or group feeling. Consequently, this group feeling was the mechanism or the insight—Here I am answering the question asked earlier—that helped in the success of the revolution in these two Arab countries; and of course, Ibn Khaldun has already suggested or predicted this in his Introduction.

Thus, and according to these two experiences, the decline and downfall of these leaders is very clear when one uses Ibn Khaldun's theory. It is an upshot of the failure of these leaders to keep the links of Asabiyah alive with the people, which resulted from their politics and the way they rule their people. Ibn Khaldun spoke about the effects of the failure to keep the Asabiyah and its consequences on the side of the leaders. He said: "If the ruler uses force and is ready to mete out punishment and eager to expose the faults

of people and to count their sins, (his subjects) become fearful and depressed and seek to protect themselves against him". (Ibn Khaldun, 1995, p. 153)

This undermines people's sense of Asabiyah toward their leaders and this will be the main source of their decline. This was clearly seen in most of the Arab countries in which citizens were repressed by their leaders. Ibn Khaldun was never in favour of the idea of repression, he even argued that when people realize this, they often react in a reciprocal way, then, he said "The subjects often conspire to kill the ruler. Thus, the dynasty decays, and the fence (that protects it) lies in ruin. If the ruler continues to keep a forceful grip on his subjects, group feeling will be destroyed" (Ibn Khaldun, 1995, p.153). This is exactly what Arab countries are undergoing through. For instance, most of the Arab leaders used power to serve their own interests leaving these people who brought them to power on the periphery with harsh conditions and unbearable life. Thus, this inspired the masses to have their own Asabiyah among them as an advanced weapon that can help them succeed in removing these leaders.

Conclusion

As it can be seen from the previous paragraphs, this article has tried to give some insights on the implementation or applicability of Ibn Khaldun's theory on what is taking place in the Arab world. More significantly, it has tried to reveal the fact that the idea of Asabiyah or group feeling explained by Ibn Khaldun in his Introduction to History can be used as medium through which one can look at the world we inhabit, notably the Arab world.

All in all, Ibn Khaldun's notion of Asabiyah is very pertinent to the social changes that are taking place in Arab world. More significantly, one may even argue that Ibn Khaldun had predicted these changes that the Arab world is witnessing. His notion of Asabiyah or group feeling will always remain an important insight or method for anyone who is interested in the idea of social change for the oppressed and repressed victims.

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