

# Ibn Khaldun: What Would He Write About Today's World?

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**Abstract:** This article revisits Ibn Khaldun as a seminal yet insufficiently integrated thinker in contemporary discussions on politics, development and diplomacy. Although widely cited, his theoretical legacy, especially his formulation of *‘Ilm al-‘Umran*, a science of human social formation, remains marginalized within dominant Eurocentric intellectual traditions. Ibn Khaldun's life, marked by service, diplomacy, exile and scholarly retreat, shaped his profound reflections on power, alliances and societal transformation. In *al-Muqaddimah*, he articulated a universal theory of social development centred on culture, cognition, and cyclical patterns of rise and decline. The article argues that modern scholarship overlooks the conceptual richness of *‘Umran*, often reducing it to “culture,” despite its wider meanings encompassing prosperity, social integration and civilization. By reclaiming Ibn Khaldun as a foundational theorist, the study invites renewed engagement with his analytic tools, particularly *‘Umran* and *‘Asabiyya*, as valuable lenses for interpreting global politics, sustainable development and the dynamics of societal change today.

**Keywords:** Ibn Khaldun; *Ilm al-‘Umran*; Civilization; Social Theory; Political Development

## Who is Ibn Khaldun?

Before venturing into an answer to the question posed in the title of this article I begin by identifying Ibn Khaldun and his contributions. While mentioned and cited by many no real attempts have been made to integrate his contributions to the cumulative knowledge on science and development and much less on extending his theoretical contributions to a better understanding of today's world of politics, development and diplomacy.

Ibn Khaldun has been claimed as the forerunner of the fields of history,

historiography, demography, philosophy, sociology, anthropology,<sup>1</sup> economics,<sup>2</sup> logic, politics, and more. Clearly, Ibn Khaldun contributed something unique in scholarship: a new science, that he named *‘Ilm al-‘Umran*, which concerns the human genius of constructing society. Let me first contextualize his theory with observations about Ibn Khaldun the man, the scholar, and his thought.

Among recognitions of Ibn Khaldun’s influence, Arnold J. Toynbee described Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah* as follows: “he has conceived and formulated a philosophy of history which is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place.”<sup>3</sup> Even contemporary reference sources attest to this stature. Wikipedia, for example, notes that modern scholars across fields, from sociology and historiography to political theory, have hailed Ibn Khaldun as one of the most important thinkers in the history of ideas: Ernest Gellner recognised Ibn Khaldun’s definition of government as “the best in the history of political theory.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the British philosopher Robert Flint praised him in striking terms:

“*Ibn Khaldun* (A.D. 1332–1406), considered simply as an historian had superiors even among Arabic authors, but as a theorist on history he had no equal in any age or country until Vico appeared, more than three hundred years later. Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine were not his peers, and all others were unworthy of being even mentioned along with him. He was admirable alike by his originality and sagacity, his profundity and his comprehensiveness. He was, however, a man apart, as solitary and unique among his co-religionists and contemporaries in the department of historical philosophy as was Dante in poetry or Roger Bacon in science among theirs.”<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, Ibn Khaldun contributed something unique in scholarship: a new science, that he named *‘Ilm al-‘Umran*, which concerns the human genius of constructing society. Let me first contextualize his theory with observations about Ibn Khaldun the man, the scholar, and his thought. His full name is Abu Zayd ‘Abd ar-Rahman bin Muhammad bin al-Hassan bin Muhammad bin Jabir bin Muhammad ibn Ibrahim bin ‘Abd ar-Rahman bin Khaldun al Hadrami; thus tracing his genealogical roots to Yemeni Arabs who lived in Andalusia, but he is widely known simply in the intellectual world as Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406).

<sup>1</sup> Baali 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Haddad 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Toynbee 1935, 322.

<sup>4</sup> See Gellner 1988, 239. See also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn\\_Khaldun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Khaldun).

<sup>5</sup> Flint 1893, 86.

He was born in Tunis, Tunisia into the House of Khaldun (Banu Khaldun), and died in Cairo, Egypt. His ancestry goes back to the Arabian region of Hadramawt. His family had settled in Seville, Andalusia. Khaldun bin 'Uthman established himself in Carmona, Andalusia with a small group of Hadramis where the family was founded "... [and where] ... [T]he house of Khaldun had established itself as an eminent family of politicians and men of knowledge."<sup>6</sup> Later in the thirteenth century the Khaldun family resettled in Tunis, where Ibn Khaldun was born in 1332.

Muhammad Al-Talibi based his observations on the original Arabic text in Ibn Khaldun's own handwriting. He cited Manuscript #1614, dated 1351, located in Escorial Library in Spain. He observes that Ibn Khaldun lived for four years, 1375–1379, with his family in seclusion in the Fortress Bani Salamah, situated in Algeria in the Province of Wahran, 6 km from the village of Faranda.<sup>7</sup> He had led privileged and turbulent years in the political life in Andalusia and al-Maghrif (North Africa). Al-Talbi asks:

"What has Ibn Khaldun achieved in his seclusion? Has he discovered the discipline of history? No! He created a science never known before. He gave this newborn the name 'Ilm al-'Umran. The subject concerns human development and social integration in a developmental framework. He specified its principles and laws."<sup>8</sup>

### ***Al-Muqaddimah***

It is his book, *al-Muqaddimah* or Prolegomena (Introduction), that identifies the fundamental principles of his new science in remarkable detail, describing a universal theory of the dynamic development of human society, with culture at its core. Human thought is centered in the nature of societal development.

And yet, as Syed Farid Alatas noted, there is the issue of the general neglect toward Ibn Khaldun and his contributions to contemporary fields and especially to a better understanding of contemporary world affairs. Alatas brings up the notions of Eurocentrism and Orientalism as he tries to account for such neglect, and the relative denial of the relevance of Ibn Khaldun's work to the study of history and contemporary society, "a relative neglect ... as a theorist."<sup>9</sup> He goes on to write: "a persistent feature (of Orientalism and the

<sup>6</sup> Alatas 2014, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Talbi 1982, 26–27

<sup>8</sup> Al-Talibi 1982, 28; author's non-literal translation from the original Arabic.

<sup>9</sup> Alatas 2014, 1.

related Eurocentrism) ... the serious consideration of the thought of seminal non-Western thinkers as sources of theories and concepts that are applicable to historical and empirical data is largely absent.” As he considers Ibn Khaldun’s impact on sociological thought and theory, Alatas asks: “Why should a social thinker like Ibn Khaldun be excluded from the serious study of the history of sociology, sociological theory, or historical sociology?”<sup>10</sup>

Those considered founders of the field of sociology are all Europeans – Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, and their influence extends into the non-western world. Others raised similar questions of neglect and marginalization in a different way the field of anthropology while identifying Ibn Khaldun’s contributions to understanding anthropological theory.<sup>11</sup>

According to Alatas whose data come from Ibn Khaldun’s primary source,<sup>12</sup> the Khalduns remained in Seville during the entire Umayyad period in al-Andalus (756–1031), gaining high ministerial posts in the latter half of the eleventh century, during which an alliance was made with the Almoravid ruler of the Maghrib (North Africa) that resulted in the defeat of Alfonso VI, king of Castille in 1086 AD. Almoravid rule was followed by Almohads (1147–1275) and the Khalduns continued to enjoy authority until their power began to decline. It was at that time that the Khalduns left Seville, settling in Ceuta, off the coast of North Africa which was under Hafsids rule. The grandparents of Ibn Khaldun moved to what is now Algeria under the patronage and protection of the ruler becoming chamberlain, but power shifted, and power struggle in the region of North Africa was intense, followed by murder of Khaldun family members and wealth confiscation. The family ultimately settled in Tunis, where Ibn Khaldun was born in 1332 in the midst of regional political turmoil and power struggles.

### **Politics, Diplomacy, Alliances, and Power Struggles**

Ibn Khaldun, I suggest, would have felt at home in today’s global world political power struggles and shifting alliances. His world, that of Mashriq (East of North Africa) and Maghrib (western North Africa), in other words the Arab World of his time, was also at his time the global world. He immersed and observed. He navigated and applied diplomacy skills, political knowledge, while deeply steeped in scholarly knowledge and Islamic sciences and Greek

<sup>10</sup> Alatas 2014. See also Alatas 2006, 782.

<sup>11</sup> El Guindi 2020; El Guindi 2003 [1999]. For more on Ibn Khaldun see Khaldun 1858; Khaldun 2003; Khaldun 2006; Khaldun 2008; Khaldun 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Khaldun 2006.

thought, throughout his childhood which was marked by the best of education. He had the opportunity of seeking power and pushing for governance but he opted (according to many sources) to withdraw from the political life to a life of scholarship. His broad experiential knowledge of adulthood and rich observation of global events enriched his analytic capacity, leading to giving the world a new science, and it is to this new science, *Ilm al-'Umran* that we now turn.

### ***Ilm al-'Umran***

In my recent publication<sup>13</sup> I began looking critically at the notion of '*Umran*' which Ibn Khaldun used as the title of the new science he innovatively formulated.<sup>14</sup> Etymologically, the Arabic word '*Umran*' derives from the root '-*umr*', which has multiple lexical and semantic derivatives ranging from urban development, to prosperity, to societal development, to human habitation, to social integration, and more. Scholars of 'sustainable development' today would benefit, I contend, if they attempt to seriously integrate principles of this science into their theories. Selecting the English term 'culture' as many scholars have would assume that it embraces all these significations. The present author at some point had also assumed that culture would be an appropriate translation of Khaldun's usage of the notion of '*Umran*' into English. However, as I learned more about the concept and his theory, I question this assumption and find that it limits the more encompassing, theoretical landscape that the Arabic word invokes especially in the context of Ibn Khaldun's usage.

Presently, the notion 'civilization' has been getting wide attention. It is one of the concepts also used in attempts to illuminate the notion of '*Umran*'. Recently, I used *civilization* in an article describing the sentiment of Egyptians toward Egypt.<sup>15</sup> There are many other contemporary usages suggesting 'culture', 'tradition', 'era', 'phase', and many more. My use is consistent with the scientific, archeological use meaning a stage of development for humankind around 10,000 years ago, the phase of civilization following the period of the hunting-gathering mode of existence.

I consider the notion of '*Umran*' as one that encompasses cultural, societal and cognitive dimensions which cannot be reduced to the notion of culture alone. Ibn Khaldun was a fourteenth century learned scholar of Arabic and

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<sup>13</sup> El Guindi 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn Khaldun 1961.

<sup>15</sup> El Guindi 2025a; El Guindi 2025b; El Guindi 2021, and its translation to French.

Islam attempting to make sense of world affairs in his time, one in which he both lived and participated. His choice of the term ‘Umran for his new science needs to be problematized and addressed. He was undoubtedly challenged to produce a framework that would enhance understanding of how humankind organized itself by producing society which developed into particular patterns through cultural means.

Inevitably, the ‘cyclicity’ embedded in his theory of societal development integrated two central principles that are dealt with in current scholarship separately, ‘*Umran* and ‘*Asabiyya*. which are proposed in the present work as cornerstones of a theoretical framework that may be deployed toward the understanding current political dynamics, a task that is beyond the scope of this particular paper.

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