



# The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History

*Ibn Khaldun , Danyal Nicholson , Franz Rosenthal (Translator)*

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**The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History** Ibn Khaldun , Danyal Nicholson , Franz Rosenthal (Translator)

The main purpose of publishing this kindle edition is to educate, not to entertain. Written by the great fourteenth-century scholar Ibn Khaldun, this monumental work laid down the foundations of several fields of knowledge, including philosophy of history, sociology, ethnography, and economics. Ibn Khaldun was a follower of the Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence. The Muqaddimah is of course a long read and the Kindle version has recently been updated so there are improvements with regards to the formatting, there are purposely no line endings and a limit on paragraph breaks due to the size of the book. It has been split into chapters in order to make the reading experience more easy for readers. However, it is a long book so it may be hard for some people to read it so quickly. It is better if it is read and digested slowly. The production of this kindle edition purposely does not include so many line breaks so as not to disrupt the flow of this Islamic text. It is a long read and the table of contents has been recently formatted more correctly. The knowledge that Ibn Khaldun has given in this book is only a small portion of the sources of knowledges from which he had taken in order to compile this masterpiece. Know that Islamic Scholars are very deep people and their works are truly astounding regardless of length. Masha Allah.

## The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History Details

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## Huda Yahya says

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## Mohammed Ali says

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## Blair says

*“The intellectual sciences are natural to man, in as much as he is a thinking being.”*

Truly Ibn Khaldun is a thinking being, creating this astonishing summary of the wisdom and knowledge of his time. He surpassed previous attempts to explain history, claiming with justification, *“We, on the other hand, were inspired by God. He led us to a science whose truth we ruthlessly set forth.”*

His ruthless enumeration of the many sources of historical distortion reminds me of E. H. Carr’s essay *What Is History?*. Carr points out the tendency of historians to cast all of history in terms of their present environment. For Khaldun, his world was one of many unstable and chaotic states. This gave him the opportunity to observe a lot of history in a short time, leading to his insight that the success of a civilization leads to its decay.

The value of a book written by a brilliant mind from a different time and culture is that it gives us a different perspective on issues that still exist today. One such issue is the conflict between rational and religious thinking. Much of the book employs what I would call scientific materialism. In his own words, used while debunking astrology, *“astrologers give us only the astrological reason. They ought also to give us the terrestrial reason.”* Ibn Khaldun is also a believing Muslim, and other parts of the book reflect that. The conflict between religion and *terrestrial* reason co-exists uneasily in this book.

Each of his chapters begins with a concise summary and ends with a reminder that suggests God’s will is best revealed by terrestrial observation. I will follow the same format to give a feel for how the book reads.

*“God gives guidance and success to that which is correct.”*

## Insight Ahead of his Time

*“Excessive taxation reduces revenue. Severity to students does them harm.”*

Ibn Khaldun often writes in abstract terms to give the big picture, from which I can only try to interpolate what his society was actually like in detail. For example, he displays an impressively modern understanding of economics. This suggests that a market economy was flourishing to some extent during his time. He presciently warns the ruler to stay out of commercial activity. Again, it suggests a centrally controlled economy was not the norm. The following explains the diminishing returns of taxation:

*“When tax assessments and imposts upon the subjects are low, the latter have the energy and desire to do things. Cultural enterprises grow and increase, because the low taxes bring satisfaction... Eventually, the taxes will weigh heavily upon the subjects and overburden them. The result is that the interest of the subjects in cultural enterprises disappears, since when they compare expenditures and taxes with their income and gain and see the little profit they make, they lose all hope. Therefore, many of them refrain from all cultural*

*activity. Thus, the total revenue continues to decrease. Finally, civilization is destroyed, because the incentive for cultural activity is gone."*

Turning to education, he displays a sensitivity that can be seen as well ahead of his time:

*"Severe punishment in the course of instruction does harm to the student, especially to little children, because it belongs among (the things that make for a) bad habit. It makes them lazy and induces them to lie and be insincere. That is, their outward behavior differs from what they are thinking, because they are afraid that they will have to suffer tyrannical treatment (if they tell the truth). Thus, they are taught deceit and trickery. This becomes their custom and character."*

The book includes details on many other subjects, including an unexpectedly thorough description of midwifery. It even gives a reasonable account of evolution, though without natural selection. The insight into the knowledge of his time is fascinating.

*"May God inspire us to choose the right course for ourselves, and may He make us profit from our beneficial actions. There is no Lord except Him."*

### **The Darker Side of Geography**

*"The northern quarter of the earth has more civilization than the southern quarter. The reason thereof."*

The knowledge of geography at the time is impressive, as Ibn Khaldun surveys the known world from Norway to "the islands of Korea". He explains how geography and climate are linked to the rise of civilization in a way that reminds me of Jared Diamond in *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. The understanding of what lay to the south was a little more vague, as this uncomfortable passage suggests:

*"To the south of this Nile, there is a Negro people called Lamlam. They are unbelievers. There, they constitute the ordinary mass of slaves. Beyond them to the south, there is no civilization in the proper sense. There are only humans who are closer to dumb animals than to rational beings. They live in thickets and caves and eat herbs and unprepared grain. They frequently eat each other. They cannot be considered human beings... The Negro nations are, as a rule, submissive to slavery, because (Negroes) have little (that is essentially) human and have attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals, as we have stated."*

This window into the past reminds us that these attitudes are far older than the modern West or even Islam. Ibn Khaldun is a geographical determinist rather than a racist, as he says black skin and other characteristics are a result of the hot sun, just as white skin was a result of a lack of sun in the uncivilized regions to the north. But there is no escaping the implications.

The condition of slavery itself is frequently mentioned but never examined. In his time it was understood as the way things have always been, economically necessary for an educated elite to flourish. But it is convenient to believe the slaves are predestined to serve their purpose.

*"This is how God proceeds with His creatures."*

### **Frontier Culture and the Contradictions of Civilization**

*"Sedentary people are much concerned with all kinds of pleasures. They are accustomed to luxury and*

*success in worldly occupations and to indulgence in worldly desires. Therefore, their souls are colored with all kinds of blameworthy and evil qualities.”*

This book is the product of a highly educated man distilling the insights of an advanced civilization. But he seems nostalgic for a simpler society as represented by the desert Arabs. They are brave, resilient, and loyal to their group, and above all, hungry. It reminds me of the American frontier. One sometimes gets the impression that civilization is a cause for regret.

*“The frugal inhabitants of the desert and those of settled areas who have accustomed themselves to hunger and to abstinence from pleasures are found to be more religious and more ready for divine worship than people who live in luxury and abundance. Indeed, it can be observed that there are few religious people in towns and cities, in as much as people there are for the most part obdurate and careless, which is connected with the use of much meat, seasonings, and fine wheat. The existence of pious men and ascetics is, therefore, restricted to the desert, whose inhabitants eat frugally.”*

He tells us that the rule of law of a sedentary civilization reduces the fortitude of the population by taking away their initiative. The desert Arabs could fend for themselves. The frontier myth is still with us – self-reliant Americans carry guns to be responsible for their own security.

Although he seems to love the desert tribes as individuals, he has a less positive view on their collective impact on the civilization he is so ambivalent about.

*“Places that succumb to the Arabs are quickly ruined. The reason for this is that (the Arabs) are a savage nation, fully accustomed to savagery and the things that cause it. Savagery has become their character and nature. They enjoy it, because it means freedom from authority and no subservience to leadership. Such a natural disposition is the negation and antithesis of civilization.”*

*“Compared with sedentary people, they are on a level with wild, untamable (animals) and dumb beasts of prey. Such people are the Arabs.”*

One should remember that the author is an Arab, and praises the accomplishments of Arabs in other parts of his book. If the desert Arabs are the equivalent of the American frontier, perhaps this is the consequence of when frontier mentality collides with the civilized world.

*“God has power to do what He wishes.”*

### **A Civilization Lasts Only Four Generations**

*“It should be known that the world of the elements and all it contains comes into being and decays.”*

The theme of the book is that any society requires “group feeling” to hold it together, and civilization is built with “royal authority”. The sedentary lifestyle and luxuries at first contribute to the strength of a civilization, but then lead to its downfall. I think his explanation of why an empire based on a family dynasty last only four generations is worth recounting in detail:

*“The four generations can be explained as the builder, the one who has personal contact with the builder, the one who relies on tradition, and the destroyer.”*

*“The builder of the glory (of the family) knows what it cost him to do the work, and he keeps the qualities*

*that created his glory and made it last. The son who comes after him had personal contact with his father and thus learned those things from him. However, he is inferior in this respect to (his father), in as much as a person who learns things through study is inferior to a person who knows them from practical application. The third generation must be content with imitation and, in particular, with reliance upon tradition. This member is inferior to him of the second generation, in as much as a person who relies (blindly) upon tradition is inferior to a person who exercises independent judgment."*

*"The fourth generation, then, is inferior to the preceding ones in every respect. This member has lost the qualities that preserved the edifice of their glory. He (actually) despises (those qualities). He imagines that the edifice was not built through application and effort. He thinks that it was something due his people from the very beginning by virtue of the mere fact of their (noble) descent, and not something that resulted from group (effort) and (individual) qualities."*

In addition, a sedentary lifestyle *"leads to diversification of the desires of the belly for pleasurable food and drink. This is followed by diversification of the pleasures of sex through various ways of sexual intercourse, such as adultery and homosexuality. This leads to destruction of the (human) species."*

He calls the final state of civilization *senility*, and observes that once reached it cannot be reversed. This sense of entitlement, forgetting where peace and prosperity come from, and obsessive pleasure seeking describes modern Western culture. Have we passed our four generation limit, and will we be swept away by superior *group feeling* of tribes from the desert, or by the *royal authority* of a rising China? Then again, the Roman Empire hung on for centuries after its decline began.

*"God creates whatever He wishes, and His is the choice."*

## **The Role of Religion**

*"Religious propaganda cannot materialize without group feeling."*

Many of the chapters take a very *terrestrial* view of the role of religion. Here he tells us religion will not succeed without man's help:

*"The truth one must know is that no religious or political propaganda can be successful, unless power and group feeling exist to support the religious and political aspirations and to defend them against those who reject them, until God's will with regard to them materializes. This is indicated in the afore-mentioned tradition: God sent no prophet who did not enjoy the protection of his people."*

And religion is not even required for a successful civilization:

*"One of its premises is that the restraining influence comes into being only through a religious law from God, to which the mass submits as a matter of belief and religious creed. This premise is not acceptable. The restraining influence comes into being as the result of the impetus of royal authority and the forcefulness of the mighty, even if there is no religious law. This was the case among the Magians and other nations who had no scriptures and had not been reached by a prophetic mission."*

Yet the chapters that present early Islamic history tell us that none of the major figures can do any wrong. Even when the fourth caliph 'Ali was defeated by Mu'awiyah, and the capital was moved from spiritual Medina to sedentary Damascus, no fault with either side can be found. One is not supposed to ask if the caliphate was a victim of his four-generation rule, and the royal authority acquired by Mu'awiyah was too

much to resist.

*“One should beware of letting one's mind or tongue become used to criticizing any of (the ancient Muslims). One's heart should not be tempted by doubts concerning anything that happened in connection with them. They never differed among themselves except for good reasons. It should further be believed that their differences were a source of divine mercy for later Muslims, so that every (later Muslim) can take as his model the old Muslim of his choice and make him his imam, guide, and leader.”*

This is an interesting take on the idea that diversity is strength – you can cherry pick the tradition of your choice.

He makes the argument that although submission to civil law weakens men by destroying their self-reliance, submission to religious law strengthens them. “When the Muslims got their religion from the Lawgiver (Muhammad), the restraining influence came from themselves.” Over time, “The influence of religion decreased among men, and they came to use restraining laws. The religious law became a branch of learning and a craft to be acquired through instruction and education.” This passage, and much else in the book, suggests that religious values were a personal choice. This conflicts with an image of Islam taken from modern Saudi Arabia or Iran. Perhaps enforcement of religious law by royal authority was not as common during his time. Or he chose not to talk about it.

*“If this is understood, God's wise plans with regard to His creation and creatures will become clear.”*

### **The Battle over Aristotle**

*"A refutation of philosophy. The corruption of the students of philosophy."*

The smoldering war between terrestrial reason and religion bursts into the open in the last few chapters. The irony here is that he is using the rational methods of Aristotle to refute reason. He makes the reasonable case that philosophy is not capable of comprehending the divine:

*“The philosophers, who restrict themselves to affirming the intellect and neglect everything beyond it, are in a way comparable, to physicists who restrict themselves to affirming the body and who disregard (both) soul and intellect in the belief that there is nothing beyond the body in (God's) wise plan concerning (the world of) existence.”*

But the religious viewpoint is more restrictive than that:

*“However, we must refrain from studying these things, since such (restraint) falls under (the duty of) the Muslim not to do what does not concern him. The problems of physics are of no importance for us in our religious affairs or our livelihoods. Therefore, we must leave them alone.”*

A large part of this book violates this injunction. Fortunately, he wrote it anyway, and we in later generations can benefit from his wisdom and foresight. This remarkable book is well worth reading.

*"And He creates what you do not know."*

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## Fatema Hassan , bahrain says

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The idea of explaining historical events with reference to social and economic structures is familiar now but in his time was something new. A quick comparison to contemporary European historical writings shows nothing like the self-conscious interest in the structures of civilisations that form the basis of Ibn Khaldun's work: group identities, forms of agriculture, forms of economic activity (including business profits and discussions on taxation), or the developmental pattern of state administrations. Although Ibn Khaldun's work is thoroughly Islamic, Sunni and indulgent to Sufism, his interest is in the human and material causation of

events. Geography and Human cultures are the direct driving forces here.

For Ibn Khaldun the harsh conditions of the desert or the nomadic lifestyle created a unifying sense of group identity. Their poverty and desire for the goods that urban civilisations produced would draw such groups into conflict with settled communities, which when the latter were in decline they would overcome. The richer resource base of a more urbanised civilisation would allow the group to expand, the increasing sophistication of the ruling family would lead it to become isolated from the rest of their original group over time, this would lead to the decay and weakness of the state making it vulnerable to the next incoming group of nomadic peoples.

As an explanatory formula for the recent North-African history of Ibn Khaldun's day, or for that matter the rise of the original Islamic Caliphate, the barbarian invasions of the western Half of the Roman Empire, or the advent of the Mongols or Manchus in northern-China, it was brilliant and insightful. His notion of cyclical cycles of growth and decay remind me of Weber's theory of political leadership which posits the possibility of a cycle from charismatic leadership to bureaucracy to stagnation. But it is not a universal formula for historical change. Maddeningly at one moment he implies that Islamic civilisation is undergoing a relative decline while the European Christian and Chinese civilisations are in a phases of upward growth but the idea is not explored explicitly. Irritatingly he often repeats a kind of Buddenbrooks rule that a ruling dynasty can only endure for a fixed number of generations before collapsing (although the number of generations varies). This is an organic vision of human social life. Societies and ways of life are born, grow, mature, and die as much as people. Reading Ibn Khaldun one needn't restrict this idea to political entities either, the same processes occur everywhere.

Given Ibn Khaldun's family background and occasional spells of time working in Muslim Spain it would have been deeply satisfying (at least for me) if he had looked at the phenomena of the Reconquista in the light of his theories. Later in his career, on a diplomatic mission to Castile, he was even invited by Pedro the Cruel to work for him - an opportunity which he declined. Unfortunate as I find the loss of a discussion on the decline of Muslim Spain this did leave him free to meet Timur the Lame whose rise and rule drawing on the group feeling of the Chingisids, the descendants of Genghis Khan, falls neatly into the framework set out by Ibn Khaldun.

Ibn Khaldun goes further, because the cyclical succession of dynasties that he analyses do not merely effect political history but also impact on social and economic history. Initially the incomers are a destructive influence on agriculture and the built environment, but as they become acculturated to urban civilisation they change. A civilisation in decline, with a declining tax base will wither in other areas of economic and intellectually life, while a growing, expanding civilisation will have an expanding tax base, a richer ecosystem of economic activity and have a higher level of cultural attainment in the arts and sciences. This gives the analysis an interplay between the moral simplicity and military strength of the incomers against all that urbanised civilisation has to offer, but ultimately it is the features of urbanised life and its labour specialisation that sustain human life.

This is a work that is rich, fertile, and irritating by turn. Inspiring in its creativity, and maddeningly that it didn't inspire a North-African medieval Annales School. I'm sure that the Muqaddimah has more to offer to someone much more familiar with the rise and fall of the early Islamic dynasties than I am, but it is none the less clear that this is a major work of historical theory.

PS according to Ibn Khaldun Euclid was a carpenter. I think I would have found school maths easier if the questions had been posed as practical carpentry problems.

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## Rayan Jamal says

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## Corinne says

I read this book because my History of Islam professor recommended it in a class last fall. 8 months later I looked through my notes and saw that I wrote down that I wanted to read it, and so I did.

This book surprised me in that I actually enjoyed reading it. I figured it would have good information but be tedious and boring. Not the case, Ibn Khaldun (and perhaps with the help of the translator) has a curious nature and a light humor in his work. He really steps back and looks at the world around him.

I recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in the history and culture of North Africa and the Middle East. That said, it shouldn't be your introduction to it. I had taken a History of Islam and an Anthropology of Morocco class which gave me familiarity to religious terms, historical events, and an idea of who different groups were. So be curious about the subject before trying this book. Also, know something



about modern science because he says some interesting things that are downright incorrect. Like how skin color has to do with the air. Good try buddy :-)

In the end I gave it four stars. It does what it advertises, and it does it well!

## F-Read says

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