

Ibn Khaldūn's Notion of *'Umrān*: An Alternative Unit of Analysis for Contemporary Politics?



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Introduction

Most studies on Ibn Khaldūn have emphasized the similarities between his thought and the ideas and models of the modern social sciences. It is these similarities and parallels that lie at the root of the high esteem in which he is held in both the East and the West today. But the differences between his thought and the modern social sciences are perhaps more fecund, offering a new window onto the great thinker with the potential to improve our understanding of the man and to reveal alternative frameworks to the entrenched social-scientific models of our age.

In this context, one of the most noteworthy characteristics of Ibn Khaldūn's thought, and one that distinguishes it from mainstream (and, in a sense, "liberal") modes of modern political analysis, is the spatiotemporality of its approach to political events and phenomena. Many have noted that the mainstream approaches in the modern social sciences, particularly in political thought, are aspatial, atemporal, and rooted in the entirely modern metaphysical fiction of the "individual" as their basic unit of analysis and their ultimate point of reference.¹ This is because the abstract, universal notion of the individual is viewed as the prerequisite metaphysical and moral foundation for the social and for the political. The universalistic nature of this notion pushes all other variables that arise in time and space—including all political, social, historical, cultural, and even geographic variables—out of the equation, thus resulting in a universalistic analytical framework with a timeless and placeless "individual" as its fundamental point of reference. This does not mean that the impact of time and space is entirely left out of modern political analysis, but even in models that grant them a role, they are reduced to external, incidental elements that are at best marginal to the tools of political analysis. While this individual-based universalism of modern political analysis has certainly helped political science attain a degree of methodological certainty and universality similar to that in the modern physical sciences, it has also resulted in serious inaccuracies and misapprehensions in the truth claims of the discipline.

Ibn Khaldūn instead approaches social and political events and phenomena in the context of a certain spatiotemporality, but this should not be

viewed as a sort of boundless particularism that would render impossible any sort of analysis rooted in abstraction or generalization. Ibn Khaldūn's spatiotemporality is subject to a higher universal framework, which means that it has limits. This framework makes it possible for Ibn Khaldūn's thought to "do" social science, but it also allows it to mobilize spatial and temporal variables as essential elements of its model. This seemingly contradictory state of affairs could be described as a form of "universal particularism."

In Ibn Khaldūn's thought, this universal particularism is embodied and given expression in the fundamental concept of *'umrān*.² *'Umrān* may be defined as an organic environment that is larger than the individual, state, or society, but narrower than humankind as a whole. This environment plays an important role in shaping people's natures, attitudes, and behaviors at the individual level, but it is also shaped by them, changing over the long term under the collective weight of individuals' actions over time. This article begins with an account of *'umrān* as a research tool and unit of analysis as formulated by Ibn Khaldūn in his *Muqaddima*. Following this account of *'umrān*, I will argue for *'umrān* and the universal particularism it represents as potential alternative units and methods of analysis for modern researchers in the social sciences, specifically political science.

Before moving on, however, I would like to underline a methodological issue in studies on Ibn Khaldūn's thought that deserves some attention. There is a general consensus that the *Muqaddima* is a masterpiece with few peers, and one that leaves a deep mark upon its readers. When one first reads the *Muqaddima*, one cannot help but be impressed at Ibn Khaldūn's realism, the strength of his observations, the refinement of his understanding, his confidence in his model, and the clarity of his thought. But those who push slightly deeper begin to notice a certain ambiguity in the work, and question marks begin to appear. This is primarily the case because a number of the key words that Ibn Khaldūn employs are weighted with multiple levels of meaning and multiple dimensions. To put it a different way, as Ibn Khaldūn formulates his model and explains social events and phenomena in his *Muqaddima*, he takes the linguistic means at his disposal—the Arabic language of his time and region—and loads many words with additional meanings, turning them into technical terms with meanings sometimes quite different from those they held in the contemporary vernacular. Though he expands the meanings of the terms he uses, he offers his readers little guidance on this point, thus leaving the task of unpacking these terms to posterity.

In the case of some central terms, it is almost as though he wanted them to remain ambiguous. By using the same term in various different contexts and emphasizing different levels of that term's meaning in each, all without any word of warning or explanation, Ibn Khaldūn leaves his reader in an interpretive muddle. These different layers of meaning—like concentric circles, each within the other, different but mutually consistent—force the reader who wishes to grasp the multiple dimensions of Ibn Khaldūn's work

to approach the text in a comparative and holistic manner. In other words, the only way to break through the ambiguous language of the text and reach a higher level of clarity is for the reader to approach the *Muqaddima* through a deeper, theoretically aware investigation that will require him or her to examine the work as a whole and, sometimes, to follow through the logical implications of Ibn Khaldūn's thought to an extent that the author himself never did.

It is this method of conceptualization that lies behind debates about the extent to which Ibn Khaldūn's thought is either local or universal. For those who opt to read certain key terms in the *Muqaddima* in their conventional sense, Ibn Khaldūn's thought belongs to a particular time and place; for those who can see the multiple layers in these terms and the functional meanings with which Ibn Khaldūn imbued them, his thought is more flexible and thus carries a certain level of universality. As is probably clear from my account so far, I hold to the second of these views. To do otherwise, I argue, is to lose the forest for the trees amid the encyclopedic information and particular observations contained in the *Muqaddima* and to turn one's back on the possibilities it offers for the social sciences today. In what follows, I focus on one particular concept the original sense of which Ibn Khaldūn tore away and replaced with something much more expansive, thus transforming it into a technical term but defining it only cumulatively over the course of the *Muqaddima*, or else perhaps leaving it deliberately ambiguous for later researchers to come to terms with through their own efforts. The concept in question is that of *'umrān*. Because of the many intertwined meanings of this term, it will be left untranslated throughout the present essay.³

*'Umrān: A Life-world ("Lebenswelt")*⁴

'Umrān as a Technical Term

One of the most important aspects of Ibn Khaldūn's thought is that it always evaluates phenomena in terms of their place on a coordinate plane the axes of which are space and time. The reason for this sociotemporal emphasis is that for Ibn Khaldūn change and transformation are an essential characteristic of social life. The fact of change is existential and all-encompassing, and no person, political institution, or socioeconomic or cultural group can avoid it.⁵ For this reason, phenomena can only be rendered meaningful on a coordinate plane that communicates their temporal dynamism. *'Umrān* is the system that forms this coordinate plane. But this function only becomes clear, as described above, when one steps beyond the conventional meaning of the term to see how Ibn Khaldūn has transformed it into a technical term with a new meaning. The word *'umrān* derives from the Arabic root *'-m-r*, which is defined in dictionaries as follows: "(a) to live, inhabit, dwell, continue, and remain in a place; (b) to become inhabited, stocked, or cultivated (with people, animals, or plants), to be in good repair, i.e., the contrary

of desolation, waste, or ruin; and (c) to cultivate, build, institute, promote, observe, visit, or aim at, a thing or a place.”⁶ More specifically, *‘umrān* means a *place* that has been widely settled, built up, tamed, equipped, furnished, secured, and developed. To describe a house as *ma‘mūr* (an adjective form of *‘umrān*), means that the house is a well-kept and well-furnished place of residence. When one calls a port *ma‘mūr*, it means that the port is active and filled with ships and traders.⁷

Prior to Ibn Khaldūn, the word *‘umrān*—together with its variants *ma‘mūr* and *‘imāra*—was in widespread use among geographers to denote those areas of the world with human settlement.⁸ In the first chapter of the *Muqaddima*, titled “Civilization [*‘umrān*] in General,” Ibn Khaldūn uses the word in the framework of the encyclopedic information he offers, based on Ptolemy’s *Geography* and Muḥammad al-Idrīsī’s *Tabula Rogeriana*, about the world’s geographical features; here, he uses the word in this conventional, widespread, and concrete sense in reference to particular places. Ibn Khaldūn himself describes it as follows: “*‘Umrān*. This means that human beings have to dwell in common and settle together in cities and hamlets for the comforts of companionship and for the satisfaction of human needs, as a result of the natural disposition of human beings toward co-operation in order to be able to make a living.”⁹

One of the natural extensions of this conventional sense of *‘umrān* is a high degree of social and economic development. This is the sense in which Ibn Khaldūn most often uses the term, especially in the fourth chapter of the *Muqaddima*, which is devoted to cities. There, the term *‘umrān* is used to express, for example, the developmental level of cities, the extensiveness of their populations, and the intensity of the social and economic interaction in them. He states, for example, that “*‘umrān* decreased with the decrease of mankind. Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty.”¹⁰ It is thus clear that Ibn Khaldūn is using *‘umrān*, the starting point of his investigations into society and politics, in this conventional sense.

What is important for the argument I am making here is that in conventional usage, as seen in all of the examples above, the sociospatial dimension of *‘umrān* is front and center—*‘umrān* as the spatial reflection of regular and organized interpersonal relations. Whether in the usage of geographers or that of Ibn Khaldūn in certain contexts, *‘umrān* conveys an atemporal picture relating to the intensity of interpersonal relations. In this, *‘umrān* is ultimately a place. But the importance of the concept of *‘umrān* for social and political analysis does not lie in this widespread, conventional sense, but rather in the new, technical formulation Ibn Khaldūn developed for the concept. Even in the very first pages of the *Muqaddima*, he states, “It should be known that history, in matter of fact, is information about human social organization, which itself is identical with world civilization [*al-‘umrān al-‘ālam*].”¹¹ Expanding on this point, he continues:

It deals with such conditions affecting the nature of *'umrān* as, for instance, savagery and sociability, group feeling [*'aṣabiyya*], and the different ways by which one group of human beings achieves superiority over another. It deals with royal authority and the dynasties that result (in this manner) and with the various ranks that exist within them. (It further deals) with the different kinds of gainful occupations and ways of making a living, with the sciences and crafts the human beings pursue as part of their activities and efforts, and with all the other institutions that originate in *'umrān* through its very nature.¹²

In other words, by laying out the components of *'umrān* here, Ibn Khaldūn is letting his readers know that in his book he will be doing something different from the work the geographers have come to concern themselves with—namely that he will be dealing with the matters that arise over time through the normal course of human interaction among people who have come together in a particular place. Elsewhere, while describing the subject of his book, to what he mentioned above he adds “nomadic [*badawī*] and sedentary [*ḥaḍarī*] lifestyles” and, in the sociopolitical field, “actual events and future events, all things expected to occur in *'umrān*,” thus expanding the contents of *'umrān* yet again.¹³ With the mention of these additional elements, it becomes clear that Ibn Khaldūn's *'umrān* is a dynamic process that consists of several stages and whose course is subject to certain laws, and thus that he is conceiving of it as an analytical unit whose future to a great extent can be foreseen and modeled.

Additionally, Ibn Khaldūn's mention of nomadism [*badāwa*] and savagery as components of *'umrān* in the passages above makes it clear that he is not conceiving of *'umrān* in the technical sense as restricted only to economic or cultural development or to the demographic concentrations that form the basis of such development, but that he views it as expressing a more neutral and inclusive system that is capable of encompassing and serving as the foundation for both development and underdevelopment to the same degree. When Ibn Khaldūn states, for example, that “sedentary life [*ḥaḍāra*] constitutes the last stage of *'umrān* and the point where it begins to decay,” he is not speaking of the highest degree of civilizational development, but rather of a particular point in this neutral and inclusive system.¹⁴ In this way, Ibn Khaldūn in his *Muqaddima* takes a term whose conventional meaning denotes the physical corollary of collective human life in a particular place and adds to it a historical and temporal dimension, thus turning it into a technical term that expresses the process whereby human nature unfolds in a particular spatiotemporal system.¹⁵ The science of *'umrān*, of which Ibn Khaldūn was the proud father, was the science of discovering general laws for the purpose of examining, understanding, explaining, and abstracting from this spatiotemporal process.

At the same time, however, at precious few places in the *Muqaddima* Ibn Khaldūn does have much to say about the precise borders of *'umrān* in the technical sense, a situation that holds true for many of his other concepts

as well. But those places where he does speak about the term, when considered in the context of the *Muqaddima* as a whole and the logical implications of the statements its author makes, are sufficient to produce a meaningful and satisfactory picture. To this end, one must keep in mind the existential relationship between the trinity of *'umrān*, the state or dynasty (*dawla*), and group feeling (*'aṣabiyya*). According to Ibn Khaldūn, the life of an *'umrān* depends on its *'aṣabiyya*. In explaining the relationship between the *'umrān* and the state or dynasty, Ibn Khaldūn states that *'aṣabiyya* is the fundamental element here and that so long as it remains intact, the *'umrān* will survive.

Like *'umrān*, this concept of *'aṣabiyya* is not something that Ibn Khaldūn clearly defines or articulates the borders of in his *Muqaddima*. He uses the concept in different ways in different contexts. For this reason, translators of the *Muqaddima* have sometimes employed different words to capture these different meanings.¹⁶ Additionally, a careful comparative study of Ibn Khaldūn's use of the term reveals that, as with *'umrān*, he departed from its meaning in conventional usage and turned it into a technical term. Though the full details of this technical sense of the term lie outside the scope of this article, suffice it to say here that *'aṣabiyya* may be described as a social vitality (*Lebenskraft*) that brings human society to life.¹⁷ It is this vitality or spirit that motivates a certain group of people politically, that allows the members of that group to unite in heart and mind behind a common sentiment and vision, and that guides them in their pursuit of a common goal. It is this social vitality that makes collective action possible and that thus turns a group of people into a political community.¹⁸ But *'aṣabiyya*, like *'umrān*, is a dynamic entity. It is in a constant process of transformation in parallel with changing conditions and the flow of time. In Ibn Khaldūn's thought, it is in fact the dynamic character of *'aṣabiyya* that gives *'umrān* its temporality and historical fluidity.

In explaining his argument, referring to Aristotle's concepts of form and matter, Ibn Khaldūn states that the dynasty or the state (*dawla*) is the form of the *'umrān* and that, just as form is a shape that protects the existence of matter, the state functions to protect the *'umrān*. For this reason, he emphasizes, just as with form and matter, the state and the *'umrān* are conceptually inseparable. He continues as follows:

Since the two [*'umrān* and *dawla*] cannot be separated, the disintegration of one of them must influence the other, just as its non-existence would entail the non-existence of the other. A great disintegration results only from the disintegration of the entire dynasty [*dawla*]. This happened to the dynasties of the Persians, the Byzantines, and the Arabs, (that is, the Arabs) in general as well as the Umayyads and the 'Abbasids. An individual reign, such as those of Anosharwān, Heraclius, 'Abd-al-Malik b. Marwān, or ar-Rashid, cannot exercise a sweeping disintegrating influence. Individuals follow upon each other and take over the (existing) *'umrān*. They preserve its existence and duration, and

they are very similar to each other. The real dynasty, the one that acts upon the matter of *'umrān*, belongs to group feeling [*'aṣabiyya*] and power. These remain with the individual members of the dynasty. But when the group feeling is lost and replaced by another group feeling that influences the (existing) *'umrān* and when all powerful members (of the dynasty) are wiped out, a great disintegration sets in, as we have established.¹⁹

Ibn Khaldūn thus states that the life and developmental level of the *'umrān* are dependent on the state (the dynasty), which in turn rests on *'aṣabiyya*; so long as the *'aṣabiyya* continues, so, too, does the state, and so long as the state continues, the *'umrān* does as well. It should be noted that, on this point, Ibn Khaldūn sometimes uses the terms "state" and "*'aṣabiyya*" on different levels: the individual, the tribal, and the general. On one level, for example, he speaks about *'aṣabiyya* as centered in the states and the persons of Khosrow I (Anosharwān), Heraclius, and Harun al-Rashid; at a different level, he also speaks about *'aṣabiyya* as represented by the states of the Umayyads and 'Abbasids. But at the same time, Ibn Khaldūn says that these were themselves parts of the broader Muḍar *'aṣabiyya*. The Muḍar were in turn part of a broader Arab *'aṣabiyya*, which extended out on the spatio-temporal plane to include the 'Ād, Thamūd, Amalekites, Ḥimyar, Tubba', and Adhwā'.

In a similar way, both the Greeks and the Romans were part of the broader Greco-Roman *'aṣabiyya*, while the Kayyanids and Sassanians were part of the Iranian *'aṣabiyya*. Paralleling this, there were also particular *'aṣabiyyas* with their own particular states, such as that of Mu'āwiya, as well as more general *'aṣabiyyas* with their own state forms, such as that of the Arab state. But in each case, the state and the *'umrān* are mutually complementary elements: the *'umrān* is the matter of the state, while the state is the form of the *'umrān*. Thus it is that large and higher-level *'umrāns* took the form of larger and more expansive states. If such a thing as a general Arab *'aṣabiyya* exists, this means that there is also a general Arab *'umrān* with a temporal dimension:

This can be illustrated by what happened among the nations. When the royal authority [*mulk*] of 'Ād was wiped out, their brethren, the Thamūd, took over. They were succeeded, in turn, by their brethren, the Amalekites. The Amalekites were succeeded by their brethren, the Ḥimyar. The Ḥimyar were succeeded by their brethren, the Tubba', who belonged to the Ḥimyar. They, likewise, were succeeded by the Adhwā'. Then, the Mudar came to power. The same was the case with the Persians. When the Kayyanid rule was wiped out, the Sassanians ruled after them. Eventually, God permitted them all to be destroyed by the Muslims. The same was also the case with the Greeks. Their rule was wiped out and transferred to their brethren, the Rūm (Romans). . . All this has its origin in group feeling [*'aṣabiyya*], which differs in the different groups.²⁰

As seen here, Ibn Khaldūn says that the Arab people constitute a single nation belonging to a single, shared *'aṣabiyya* that existed for years, from the

‘Ād and Thamūd to the Tubba’ and Muḍar, and that the same is true of the Greeks and Romans and the Kayyanids and Sassanians. In the active history of these nations, political authority (*mulk*) passes from the hands of one state to another, with the ‘*umrān*’ of this nation thus continuing along until the nation itself comes to an end. It is interesting that on the subject of this uninterrupted transition of political authority Ibn Khaldūn mentions the Arabs alongside the examples of the Greco-Roman and Iranian civilizations, for there was a period of some thousand years between the time of the Tubba’ state in Yemen and that of the Muḍar state.²¹ Despite this long interruption, Ibn Khaldūn sees the Muḍar as a continuation of the Tubba’, thus making it clear that he is using the concepts of ‘*aṣabiyya*’ and ‘*umrān*’ in a non-standard, technical sense.

The particular ‘*aṣabiyya*’ of a particular state or dynasty is only part of this broader sense of ‘*aṣabiyya*’. The rise and fall of the ‘*aṣabiyya*’ of a particular family may or may not correspond with the rise and fall of the ‘*umrān*’—and, as historical experience makes clear, it generally does not. The offshoots or particular ‘*aṣabiyyas*’ of the broader ‘*aṣabiyya*’ will, according to their own strength, come into power and establish their own states, one after the other. This process continues until each particular offshoot of the broader ‘*aṣabiyya*’ is consumed, whereupon the broader ‘*aṣabiyya*’ is exhausted and disappears entirely.²² Thus, it is possible to say that the life span of the large-scale ‘*umrān*’ in a particular geographical region parallels that of the general ‘*aṣabiyya*’ in that region. This means that the life of the ‘*umrān*’ is far longer than the three-generation life span, some 120 years, of a particular state, instead likely running for centuries, or even over a thousand years. Over the course of this long lifetime, the situation of the ‘*umrān*’ may improve or decline, the ‘*umrān*’ may develop or regress, but the ‘*umrān*’ itself continues.

The end of such a large-scale ‘*umrān*’, as seen in the cases of Rome, Iran, and the Arabs, is only possible when the ‘*aṣabiyya*’ of a nation has been exhausted. Ibn Khaldūn elucidates this aspect of ‘*umrān*’ and ‘*aṣabiyya*’ in the following passage:

When a dynasty [*dawla*] is wiped out, the power is taken (away) from (the members of that dynasty) by those people whose group feeling [*aṣabiyya*] has a share in the (established) group feeling, since it is recognized that submission and subservience (by others) belong to (the established group feeling) and since people are used to the fact that (established group feeling) has superiority over all other group feelings. (The same group feeling,) now, exists only in those people who are closely related (to the outgoing dynasty), because group feeling is proportionate to the degree of relationship. (It goes on that way until,) eventually, a great change takes place in the world, such as the transformation of a religion, or the disappearance of a[n] ‘*umrān*’, or something else willed by the power of God. Then, royal authority is transferred from one group to another—to the one that God permits to effect that change.²³

According to Ibn Khaldūn, the end of an *‘umrān* or *‘aṣabiyya* and the destruction of a large state and the concomitant passing of political authority from one general *‘aṣabiyya* to another is only possible when a great, large-scale change takes place at the level of the *‘umrān* that makes up the matter of that state. He says that this large-scale change is of an order that cannot be compared with the destruction of a particular state, but rather involves an unprecedented and unforeseeable development that brings about a deep change in the daily life and psycho-ontological being of a people, as in the example of the Iranian empire. The end of the Iranian *‘aṣabiyya* and state (and thus the *‘umrān*) came about through their embrace of Islam as the result of the conquests of the newly rising Arab nation, and with the Islamification and eventual subjugation of the people living in their lands at the hands of the Muslim Arab *‘aṣabiyya*.

To summarize briefly the ground covered so far in this section, *‘umrān* is a technical term that Ibn Khaldūn uses for the entire *‘aṣabiyya* of a people. In his account, this spatiotemporal unit remains in place for a span of centuries, though the states created by the various particular offshoots of the *‘umrān*'s *‘aṣabiyya* may rise and fall. The *‘umrān* itself ceases to exist when all of the particular offshoots of its *‘aṣabiyya* have institutionalized into states, exhausted themselves, and then met their end.

Relational Human Nature

In his *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldūn offers a number of clarifications and explanations that help readers to understand what he means by his new conception of *‘umrān* as a technical term. In one place, for example, he says that what he means by *‘umrān* is the sociopolitical unit that the philosophers refer to as “polis,” as when they say that “Man is ‘political’ by nature.”²⁴ Elsewhere in the *Muqaddima*, he states that “the adjective ‘political’ refers to the ‘town’ (polis), which they use as another word for human social organization.”²⁵ Ibn Khaldūn’s identification of the *‘umrān* as the polis is revealing. It also raises two issues that are worth underlining. The first is that in the Ancient Greek mentality, from which the Muslim philosophers inherited so many concepts, the *politeia* did not comprise solely the political, but also the social and, in terms of law and morality, the public sphere as well as the private.²⁶

The second issue here is that Muslim philosophers had used and expanded the meaning of the concept of polis well before Ibn Khaldūn’s time, and that it was in this broader sense of the term that Ibn Khaldūn used it. The polis in the thought of the Muslim philosophers expressed something beyond the likes of Athens and Sparta, the small-scale and self-sufficient sociopolitical units known as city-states that Plato and Aristotle had in mind when developing their ideal political models. Beyond these small “polis” states, al-Fārābī, for example, speaks of “medium-sized societies” made up of a single nation (*umma*), as well as “large societies” made up of several

different nations.²⁷ Looking at the examples and the general conclusions Ibn Khaldūn draws from them in the *Muqaddima*, it is clear that he had in mind something much broader than the polis of the Ancient Greek philosophers.

After equating his concept of *'umrān* with the polis of the philosophers, Ibn Khaldūn then elaborates on that concept. He states that it is a necessity of human nature that people should come together to live as social groups, because on their own it is impossible for individuals to obtain the food and security they need to live. To meet these needs, he says, they require one another's help and a division of labor, adding that "This is the meaning of *'umrān*, the object of the science under discussion."²⁸ The *'umrān* thus initially comes into being as a requirement of universal human nature, but it requires an additional or secondary element in order to mature fully. That element is politics, in its most general sense. If human nature is such that people can only live by coming together in society, humans' innate tendency to commit injustice and aggress against their fellows means that in so coming together people are subjected to dangers of a different order. In order to free themselves from this state of affairs, people have a need for a political authority that they can depend on to protect themselves from each other and to establish a public order. As Hobbes would later echo, Ibn Khaldūn states that the most important quality of this political authority is that "[h]e must dominate them, and have power and authority over them, so that no one of them will be able to attack another."²⁹ Unlike Hobbes, however, Ibn Khaldūn did not believe that this political authority was to be established on the basis of a social contract grounded in individual will and consent, but rather on the basis of *'aṣabiyya*.³⁰

The metamorphosis of *'aṣabiyya* over time is the product of a totality of changes that also affect socioeconomic conditions, human psychology, morality, and other areas. For this reason, the forming and transforming of *'aṣabiyya* as a psycho-ontological disposition and as the essence of politics is a function, as Ibn Khaldūn portrays it, of the transformation of human nature. The question of whether human nature is universal, fixed, and given is one that has been debated by philosophers since time immemorial. On this matter, Ibn Khaldūn opts for a middle way that can be described as "limited relationality." According to him, there is a given human nature, and it is one that is prone to be shaped in relation to the environmental conditions it encounters and to be transformed over time. Thus it is that human nature is possessed of the same universal particularism as the *'umrān*. And just as with *'umrān*, this particularism of human nature is not a boundless particularism, but one whose nature varies within a fixed framework.

But this is not to say that human nature in Ibn Khaldūn's philosophical anthropology is nothing more than a passive receiver forever being acted upon by the conditions of its environment. Though humans are prone to be influenced by environmental stimuli in the short term, over the medium and long terms their collective actions and responses reshape the environment in

which they live. The conditions of this reshaped environment then influence and shape the natures, or characters, of the young people in that human group. There is thus a mutually reinforcing relationship here between the agency of different generations of people and the structure under which they live; this relationship proceeds in a particular direction, and each side is bound to and helps construct the other. For this reason, it is impossible to understand human nature without reference to its environmental context; likewise, it is impossible to understand an environmental context without reference to what the people there have been doing over the medium and long terms.

The *Muqaddima* uses two different overlapping, or at least not firmly differentiated, terms for human nature: *fiṭra* and *ṭabīʿa*. In Islamic literature, the former of these is used for the basic structures and potentials, as yet unaffected by the influence of any environmental stimuli, with which humans are created.³¹ In Mahdi's words, the *fiṭra* is "the original state of human nature."³² The *fiṭra* may be considered the beginning of the human character, and it is a potential that is prone to being shaped and molded. Ibn Khaldūn says that "the soul in its first natural state of creation [*fiṭra*] is ready to accept whatever good or evil may arrive and leave an imprint upon it."³³ But there is another dimension to the *fiṭra*. According to Islamic belief, God created humanity with an innate potential for knowing its Creator and an inclination toward the just, the good, the beautiful, and the clean.³⁴ Ibn Khaldūn embraces this view, too, saying, "[i]n view of his natural disposition [*fiṭra*] and his power of logical reasoning, man is more inclined toward good qualities than toward bad qualities, because the evil in him is the result of the animal powers in him, and in as much as he is a human being, he is more inclined toward goodness and good qualities."³⁵

When one looks at these two understandings of the *fiṭra* in the context of the *Muqaddima* as a whole, the resulting picture is as follows: human nature, in terms of the *fiṭra*, carries an inherent disposition toward the good, the just, and the beautiful, but otherwise it is mainly a blank slate—fresh clay that can be molded in many different ways. If a person uses her reason, educates herself, and comports herself well, she may develop a character that is in keeping with her nature (*fiṭra*) and relatively resistant to environmental stimuli. Though the fundamental element that separates humans from other living beings is "reason," this does not mean that every person always acts rationally. According to Ibn Khaldūn, being human is a matter of degree: "The degree to which a human being is able to establish an orderly causal chain determines his degree of humanity. Some people are able to establish a causal nexus for two or three levels. Some are not able to go beyond that. Others may reach five or six. Their humanity, consequently, is higher."³⁶ Just as every person will not have the same degree of capacity for higher thought, those who do may not always make use of that potential. Although this capacity for higher thought may be what separates humans

from other creatures, animals especially, this quality does not exist in a vacuum—it exists in a milieu of constant interaction with other qualities that humans and other living things share. In other words, in addition to their human nature, people also carry within themselves vegetable and animal natures and the functions of these natures. These “lower” natures are an inherent part of being human; no person can entirely overcome them. For this reason, Ibn Khaldūn believes that for most people, environmental conditions are more determinative than human reason.

This leads to the second aspect of human nature: the *ṭabī‘a*, or the “second nature.” Where the *fiṭra* is a universal quality that is inherent in people in the same way from birth, the *ṭabī‘a* is not a given, is not fixed, and is not universally the same in all people. Quite the opposite, the *ṭabī‘a* is something that takes shape over time, molded through lifestyle habits, the repetition of specific behaviors, and the repeated experience of certain feelings. To put it a different way, human nature, in terms of the *ṭabī‘a*, is constructed relationally, in the encounter with environmental conditions: “Man is a child of the customs and the things he has become used to. He is not the product of his natural disposition and temperament. The conditions to which he has become accustomed, until they have become for him a quality of character and matters of habit and custom, have replaced his natural disposition.”³⁷ Simply put, this means that most people behave according to custom and habit rather than availing themselves of the possibilities afforded by their innate natures and behaving rationally.

It is on this basis that Ibn Khaldūn has been called a determinist. But in principle, and on the subject of specific individuals rather than large masses, he is not a determinist, for he maintains that people, by virtue of their *fiṭra* and their “humanity,” necessarily have the possibility and the potential to direct themselves toward the good in spite of their environmental conditions. But he also believes it a plain and unavoidable truth that the vast majority of people, in spite of their potential, live their lives on the basis of habit and imitation,³⁸ and that on the whole, the degree to which they use their faculties of reason and thought is insufficient to significantly influence the course of history. The flow of history is the flow of averages, and it is the non-rational attitude of the mass of people that determines the average. Ibn Khaldūn turns this non-rational form of behavior into a general rule.

To summarize, in Ibn Khaldūn’s philosophical anthropology, every human being is born with a *fiṭra*, an inherent inclination toward the good, the just, and the beautiful. But historical experience shows that in practice, and considering the historical movement of collective structures like the *‘umrān*, the average person does not act on the basis of the possibilities afforded by his or her *fiṭra* but on the basis of a “second nature” that is shaped by habit. To do otherwise requires constant self-awareness and self-reflection, and thus constant effort and energy. Most people are reluctant to shoulder such a weight, and without their being aware of it their habits and

behaviors fall into a predictable routine that pushes them in a particular direction. It is important to note that these habits and behaviors need not be physical actions, but extend to every aspect of our existence and penetrate every area and layer of our lives, including our needs, desires, wants, tastes, emotional states, fears, worries, and so on. The difference between people who are the products of different social contexts is therefore not simply physical or cultural, but rather existential in nature. In other words, it is impossible to speak of a given, fixed, and universal human nature that exists prior to environmental conditions (and the social or political context) or that is free of the influence of those conditions and their change and transformation over time. When Ibn Khaldūn speaks of “humans,” he is not referring to an abstract and universal notion of people with the same needs, wants, emotions, and tastes, but to a specific notion of a people who are the product of the conditions of a particular spatiotemporal context and who are therefore reflective of the characteristics of the environmental conditions of that context.

The Phases of ‘Umrān

According to Ibn Khaldūn, economic conditions are the primary factor in the shaping and transformation of human nature. They are what bring people together in the first place “to cooperate toward making their living.”³⁹ The economy, while dynamic, is not random; it is structured according to a particular order, at the root of which is the hierarchy of human needs. According to this hierarchy, which is widely accepted in Islamic thought and which from there made its way into Ibn Khaldūn’s work, human needs may be divided into three basic levels: the simple necessities of life, conveniences, and luxuries.⁴⁰ The items in these categories may all be classified under the heading of “needs,” but according to Ibn Khaldūn not all of them are needs of the same urgency. Some people may even live their whole worldly lives without ever being aware that they need many of them, for higher-level needs do not impose themselves on those who have not yet met their lower-level needs. The first of these levels comprises things that are necessary for people to live, including such basic necessities as food, shelter, and clothing. Only after people satisfy these needs does a second, higher level of needs become apparent, one that is made up of things that are necessary for maintaining a lifestyle of a certain standard. Once these reveal themselves, people then begin to work to fulfill this higher order of needs. In order for the third and highest level of needs (i.e., for luxury and comfort) to become apparent, people must first have established a lifestyle that satisfies their second-order needs (i.e., for conveniences) to a sufficient degree.

Connected with these needs and the meeting of them are ‘*umrān*’s two primary socioeconomic units: *badāwa* and *ḥaḍāra*, or the ‘*umrān badawī*’ and the ‘*umrān ḥaḍarī*’. The former of these is a world in which one’s first- and, to some extent, second-order needs—basic necessities and

conveniences—are met, but the third are undreamed of. In this world, people’s livelihoods revolve around farming crops and raising livestock. Describing such people, whom he calls the Bedouin, Ibn Khaldūn says, “Their social organization and co-operation for the needs of life and ‘*umrān*, such as food, shelter, and warmth, do not take them beyond the bare subsistence level, because of their inability (to provide) for anything beyond those (things).”⁴¹ They have neither the capital nor the time for anything more. But even in meeting their more basic needs, the Bedouin differ in their approach. Some embrace a nomadic lifestyle based on raising livestock. Others embrace a semi-nomadic lifestyle, earning their livelihoods from the raising of both crops and livestock. Others still reside in villages and towns, where they embrace a sedentary lifestyle of modest means. It is only those living permanently in large, crowded cities with an advanced division of labor who occupy a world where their second- and third-order needs (for convenience and luxury) are fully met. Ibn Khaldūn describes this world as follows: “As one knows, sedentary culture (*ḥaḍāra*) is the adoption of diversified luxuries, the cultivation of the things that go with them, and addiction to the crafts that give elegance to all the various kinds of (luxury).”⁴²

With that being said, *badāwa* and *ḥaḍāra* are not two static poles of social existence that are totally separate from each other. Bedouins, who can only meet their first- and second-order needs in a basic way, are drawn to the *ḥaḍarī* life and to its promises of luxury, comfort, and ease to the extent that their means allow. For Ibn Khaldūn, this transition from *badawī* to *ḥaḍarī* life is only the natural result of a struggle in which ‘*aṣabiyya* plays the determining role. And it is a one-way street. Once one has met one’s lower-order needs, higher-order needs impose themselves of their own accord. Very few are they who can remain indifferent to them. Because it is the behavior and choices of the majority of people that determine the flow of history and the transformation of the ‘*umrān*, Ibn Khaldūn views the transition described here as a universal and absolute law.

But it would be wrong to define *badāwa* and *ḥaḍāra* as no more than means of livelihood and levels of economic well-being, for in Ibn Khaldūn’s thought human nature is shaped by, and changes in parallel with, socio-economic conditions. Relative to *ḥaḍarī* peoples, Bedouins are, for example, harder, braver, physically stronger, freer in spirit, and more psychologically robust, ethical, religious, and communal. *Ḥaḍarī* people, in turn, are relatively more intelligent, educated, cultured, self-confident, polite, refined, secular, selfish, suspicious of their fellows, and individualistic. Most important of all, the level of mutual trust and solidarity among the Bedouins, and therefore their ‘*aṣabiyya* and capacity for collective action, is much stronger than that among *ḥaḍarī* peoples. In other words, as a group of people progresses from *badāwa* to *ḥaḍāra*, their ‘*aṣabiyya* progressively weakens until it disappears entirely as the end of the ‘*umrān* draws near. As explained above, because the difference between Bedouins and *ḥaḍarī* peoples is an

existential difference rooted in their human natures, the needs, tastes, preferences, worries, hopes, expectations, and other emotional states of the members of each group are different from those of the members of the other. The difference between the two groups also extends to the shape of their political organization. Among the Bedouins, this is the *ri'āsa*, in which custom, tradition, and personal relations are determinative; among the *ḥaḍarī* peoples this takes the form of what could be called a “rational authority” in the Weberian sense—that is, political authority (*mulk*). Because of these differences, Ibn Khaldūn counsels researchers and historians always to remember that Bedouins and *ḥaḍarī* peoples belong to two different worlds. But, to repeat, the differences separating the two groups are like the difference between different points spread out along a loop rather than a difference unbounded in scope and unlimited in extent.

The simplest, clearest, and most concrete way to define *badāwa* and *ḥaḍāra* is in terms of livelihood and geographical location. This conceptualization is in harmony with the characteristics of Ibn Khaldūn’s time and place, and for this reason most researchers who work on his thought have not felt the need to push further on this matter past what seems to be readily apparent. But here, too, as with the many similar cases detailed above, Ibn Khaldūn takes a concept and expands it for his own purposes. In the excerpt below, he offers a functional framework for *badāwa* and *ḥaḍāra* that will be enlightening for modern researchers:

[C]ities have a highly developed ‘*umrān* and their inhabitants are very prosperous, and the dynasty [*dawla*] is at the root of it, because the dynasty collects the property of the subjects and spends it on its inner circle and on the men connected with it who are more influential by reason of their position than by reason of their property. The money comes from the subjects and is spent among the people of the dynasty and then among those inhabitants of the city who are connected with them. They are the largest part (of the population). Their wealth, therefore, increases and their riches grow. The customs and ways of luxury multiply, and all the various kinds of crafts are firmly established among them. This (then) is sedentary culture [*ḥaḍāra*]. Therefore, cities in remote parts of the realm, even if they have an abundant ‘*umrān*, are found to be predominantly Bedouin and remote from sedentary culture in all their ways. This is in contrast with (the situation in) towns that lie in the middle, the center and seat of the dynasty. The only reason is that the government is near them and pours its money into them, like the water (of a river) that makes green everything around it, and fertilizes the soil adjacent to it, while in the distance everything remains dry.⁴³

In this passage, Ibn Khaldūn defines *badāwa* and *ḥaḍāra* not on the basis of livelihood or geography, but in terms of the group that holds political power and other peoples’ connection to that group. In other words, living in the city is not sufficient to qualify someone as part of the *ḥaḍarī* culture. For Ibn Khaldūn, the essence of that culture is being in constant possession of the

economic means to meet one's highest-order needs and to provide oneself a level of comfort in accordance with them. This generally only becomes possible by joining a large social circle with a ruling elite at the center. Merely living in a city and having a profession unique to city dwellers is not enough; unless one is part of the group of people who hold the reins of political power, or unless one is part of the other groups in society who derive wealth from their connections to that group, one remains a "Bedouin." In such cases, one continues to possess all of the characteristics associated with *badāwa* except for livelihood and location. Similarly, to be considered *ḥaḍarī*, one must be part of the ruling elite that distributes wealth and prosperity or else part of the groups who are lucky enough to be on the receiving end of that wealth and prosperity through their connections with the ruling elite.

A second issue here concerns the scale of *badāwa* and *ḥaḍāra*. Ibn Khaldūn states that "the goal of 'umrān is sedentary culture [*ḥaḍāra*] and luxury. When 'umrān reaches that goal, it turns toward corruption and starts being senile, as happens in the natural life of living beings."⁴⁴ This turn to *ḥaḍarī* culture and the ensuing process of corruption holds true for both particular states and larger states, as well as for the 'umrāns that constitute the substance of each. As stated above, the ultimate collapse of the general 'umrān is only possible with the fall of a general 'aṣabiyya, like the Arab 'aṣabiyya, and state, like a greater Arab state. It is thus possible to describe two types of *ḥaḍāra*. The first is the *ḥaḍāra* of the members of a particular 'aṣabiyya within a general 'aṣabiyya and those who are connected with them. The second is the *ḥaḍāra* spread out across the entire general 'umrān by the succession of small states established by the particular 'aṣabiyyas. The rise of *ḥaḍāra* in a particular 'aṣabiyya group is an indication that political authority will soon change hands. The *ḥaḍāra* of a general 'umrān, in turn, is an indication that a centuries-old human society has come to the end of its historical existence.

To summarize what I have said about 'umrān so far and to begin to draw this section to a conclusion, the term 'umrān, in the technical sense that Ibn Khaldūn formulates for it, expresses the spatiotemporal existence of a particular human society. What is more, this sphere of sociopolitical existence is, for Ibn Khaldūn, the primary analytical unit for understanding sociopolitical developments. The important point here is that 'umrān in this sense stands for something far beyond a geographical unit with particular features or an economic descriptor for a high level of development; it is a "life-world" (*Lebenswelt*) that encompasses the entirety of the activities and institutions that arise over time through people's interaction among themselves and with their environment when they are pulled together into a social unit by the natural workings of their human nature. In other words, 'umrān is not only the stage upon which the play of life unfolds; with its temporal dimension it is in fact the play of life itself. Conceiving of 'umrān as a life-world is to think of it as a

framework of social existence that influences people's behaviors, thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and many other facets of their lives.

The *'umrān* is a dynamic organism that evolves from *badāwa* to *ḥaḍāra* and that draws its energy from the dialectic between the two. The source of this dynamism is not an external and mechanical push-pull force, but rather one that is drawn from the essential characteristics of *'umrān's* own internal parameters—that is, the change and transformation of human nature. The transformation of *'umrān* is not a random divergence from an optimal balance, but a constant and ontic movement in a cyclic orbit without any equilibrium point. *'Umrān* is a process and a movement, not a fact or a state. In this sense, it would not be wrong to view *'umrān* as a verb rather than a noun.⁴⁵ Ibn Khaldūn identifies the starting point of this movement as material and economic conditions. The transformation of these conditions forces human nature, including human psychology and morality, to change, and this change in human nature in turn effects a change in the *'aṣabiyya*, which leads to a change in the general structure of politics and, finally, to a change in the structure of the *'umrān* itself.

According to Ibn Khaldūn, most of the political differences that exist between different groups of people in the world arise not as a result of cultural differences but from the cyclic movements of different *'umrāns*. To put it another way, different human societies differ from one another because each operates according to its own existential clock and calendar even though they may appear to belong to the same temporal unit. The difference here is like that between a young and an old person who both live at the same time—they both live in the same calendar year, but each at a different point on his or her own existential calendar. Just as the young and the old person will each behave differently, so, too, will two different societies differ from each other—in terms of their behaviors, feelings, tastes, fears, and so on—depending on the dictates of the phase of the movements of the different *'umrāns* to which they belong. Efforts to compare different societies must therefore attend to the movement cycles of those societies' *'umrāns* and their position on these cycles. Unlike a linear, progressive paradigm of history, the movement of an *'umrān* is not teleological—it moves toward no fixed, final point or ultimate utopia. Each phase of an *'umrān's* movement has its own advantages and disadvantages. It is therefore impossible to establish a normative relationship between the differences that exist between human societies, for these differences, being products of the *'umrān*, are not normative in nature.

Individualist Universalism versus Universal Particularism or 'Umrān

As I stated in the introduction, the value of Ibn Khaldūn's conceptualization of *'umrān* lies in its status as a potential alternative to the individualistic universalism of mainstream political thought today. One of the main

characteristics of this thought is the principle of universalism, which crystallized under Enlightenment thought and its mechanical cosmology through the reciprocal influence of the ideas of the “disengaged individual” and “instrumental reason.”⁴⁶ The modern political imaginary rests on the idea of an atomistic individual that exists in an essentially identical way everywhere and always.⁴⁷ This individual exists prior to society and politics, and thus stands unbound by any sort of sociohistorical context or ethical supersystem. This individual is self-contained, coming about through the interaction of his own desires, tastes, and immanent (instrumental) reason. The undeniable differences that exist between people and between the collective social structures they form can only be attributed to incidental conditions and factors added after the fact. According to this understanding, which is accepted as a given by most modern social-scientific approaches and especially by the mainstream models of economics and political science, the fundamental “nature” of one individual in a particular time and place can never categorically differ from that of another individual in a different time and place, regardless of the different environmental conditions to which these individuals may have been exposed. On the basis of this assumption, modern orthodox political thought also accepts as a given the assumption that this aspatial and atemporal individual and this individual’s mode of thought can serve as a foundation for social and political analysis.

Another factor that contributes to modern political thought’s claim to universality is a tendency to define political systems and institutions in a mechanical framework, as if they were machines. According to this understanding, which found its most typical expression in Hobbes’ model and continued to grow in strength and popularity through to Weber’s formulation of the modern state, political systems are mechanisms that people construct and use in a “mechanical” and “rational” way. In other words, people are not the “matter” of these mechanisms, but their creators and users. Once “produced,” political systems and institutions gain an identity independent of their creators and their creators’ needs, worldviews, emotions, moral and aesthetic transformations, et cetera. This independence gives political institutions a potentially universal applicability. From this assumption and the idea of a universal and disengaged individual nature, it follows that a rationally constructed institution or model—like any other product manufactured anywhere in the world (a computer, automobile, refrigerator, etc.)—can be exported anywhere, reproduced anywhere, and operated anywhere in accordance with its design. If one encounters a problem in practice, this is not because of something relating to the essential characteristics of the political institution or rule in question or a flaw in one’s theoretical perspective, but because of an incidental or external condition or obstacle at the point of application, such as cultural, historical, or geographical factors.

In accordance with this universalistic notion of the individual and this mechanical conception of institutions, politics, too, becomes something that

is subject to timeless, placeless, monotypical, and universal models, laws, and processes. In other words, the field of sociopolitical existence is not any sort of geographical, cultural, or historical subunit, but the world as a whole. The influence of such subunits, if any exist, is only ever secondary and incidental, to be evaluated as a "deviation" from the "ideal type." The clearest and most comprehensive manifestation of this approach is what has been dubbed Eurocentrism in the scholarly literature: a mindset that assumes that institutions and ideas shaped by the historical experience and cultural climate of Europe but established at a discursive level on the basis of the idea of the atomistic individual will be applicable and desirable everywhere and always. It is against this same background that, for example, virtually all modern political-science textbooks operate on the basis of the assumption that there is a universal ideal model of social and political organization. It is upon this same basis that all the sociopolitical analyses and categorizations they offer are carried out according to this model. And it is again upon this basis that they emphasize the universal validity of solutions to political problems and assume either an intercommunal synchronicity or a one-way teleological progression (which ultimately amounts to the same thing) of human society.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, the universalistic discourse of modern mainstream political thought lost its hegemonic power. This was likely partly a result of the weakening status of modern Enlightenment values at a philosophical level and partly a result of a cultural awakening among non-Western societies. Whatever the reason, different approaches and models began to be voiced as serious alternatives in political theory. Among the most popular of the research methodologies that arose in this context is that of "civilizational analysis." This field is based on a conception of civilization that is broader than the "mechanical" and "individual-based" nation-state, as well as its sociological corollary of "society," but narrower than the entirety of humanity. The concept of civilization that it uses as an analytical unit is one that is employed in the plural sense and that has been purged of normative prejudices. This conception of civilization is one that holds great promise for attempts to model social and political reality.

But it also faces obstacles. The greatest of these, at least in terms of the concept's wider acceptance in the field of political science, are its essentialist implications, which are diametrically opposed to the *Zeitgeist* of the age. "Civilization," in the sense that it is used most widely today, is understood above all else as the cultural, religious, and cosmological forms that set a particular group of people collectively apart and that bestow upon them a separate identity and character that make them unique. It was this conception of civilization that first gave the term a bad name, especially in Huntington's formulation, which not only essentialized the concept but also gave civilizations their own concrete agency. Researchers seeking to distance themselves from Huntington and to salvage the term have worked

hard to show just how “pluralistic” the term actually is, how “flexible” its borders are, how “loose” rather than “unique” the identities that it confers upon its members are, and how much interaction takes place between it and other social units.⁴⁸ This apologetic attitude, while understandable, has significantly undermined the functionality of “civilization” and its credibility as a meaningful unit of analysis.

This is where ‘*umrān*’ comes in. As the process of the social and political institutionalization of the satisfaction of universal human needs that are rooted in a particular conception of human nature, all unfolding within a spatiotemporal framework, ‘*umrān*’ stands out as an alternative analytical tool for the social sciences, especially political science. Though ‘*umrān*’ can contain references to cultural or ethnic forms by virtue of its relation to ‘*aṣabiyya*’, and though religious and moral elements can be included as essential variables in its model, ‘*umrān*’, at bottom, points to a non-essentialist process of change in human communities. In an age when such Enlightenment social-science concepts as the “nation-state” and “society” have lost their explanatory power, the concept of ‘*umrān*’ offers a functional framework that is spatially and temporally broader than the state but narrower than humanity as a whole, yet one that at the same time determines most human behavior. Much like Elias’ “civilizing process,” each ‘*umrān*’ is possessed of an inherent movement from *badāwa* toward *ḥaḍāra*, the source of which is socioeconomic change. Thus, the fundamental difference that distinguishes one ‘*umrān*’ from another is not an ‘*umrān*’s cultural, religious, or cosmological forms, but rather its socioeconomically based cyclical motion and its position in that cycle. For this reason, rather than comparing two different ‘*umrāns*’ with each other from a normative perspective, it is more meaningful and revealing to compare the different positions of a particular ‘*umrān*’ at different points in its cyclical movement. Additionally, because this movement is cyclical and continuous, there is no ultimate utopia toward which the ‘*umrān*’ is destined, unlike in modernization theories. In other words, the difference between two ‘*umrāns*’ is not a normative difference. This aspect effectively makes ‘*umrān*’ a “non-essentialist civilization,” and thus a better alternative to the widely used concept of “civilization.”

Concluding Remarks

The greatest contribution modern political science has made to our intellectual world is the models it has produced to help us make sense of the complex reality of politics, the lawlike conclusions it has arrived at and their presumptive applicability in all times and places, and the predictability it has brought to the future through the use of these tools. However, the discipline’s individual-centered approaches, though they have provided an abstract and geometric system that has made it easier for political scientists

to develop models and rules, have also distanced scholars from political reality and weakened the accuracy of their conclusions. Furthermore, the universalism of these approaches has a Eurocentric normative dimension that imparts a hegemonic character to modern political science's mainstream models. As an alternative, I have here proposed Ibn Khaldūn's understanding of politics, which I have dubbed "universal particularism." On the one hand, it is universal in scope, and thus offers models for understanding political reality as well as lawlike generalizations and solid predictions about the future. On the other hand, it is also particular, with its 'umrānic scale allowing for the examination of spatiotemporal difference between different societies.

No single concept can solve all of the methodological problems encountered in contemporary political studies. But for those political theorists who think that the existing paradigm of modern political studies falls short of capturing reality, the conceptualization of 'umrān that I have presented here offers a non-hegemonic unit of analysis that is closer to reality, that is more sensitive to intercommunal differences, and that may well open the door to an alternative paradigm.

Notes

- 1 – Charles Taylor, "Atomism," in *Communitarianism and Individualism*, ed. Shlomo Avineri and Avner de-Shalit (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 29–50; Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984), p. 2.
- 2 – Western translations of the *Muqaddima* render the term 'umrān in different ways, as do scholars writing about Ibn Khaldūn in Western languages. Franz Rosenthal translates the term as "civilization." Ibn Khaldūn specialists writing in German opted for *Kultur*. De Slane, who translated the *Muqaddima* into French, used the terms "civilization" and "société" (Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldūn's Philosophy of History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957], p. 184). Although the practice of leaving the term as 'umrān, which I have adopted here, is becoming increasingly common, the prevailing trend has been, and remains, to render it as "civilization." Though this is not essentially wrong, it is problematic. The term "civilization" has undergone a major semantic transformation over the past two centuries and has from time to time become embroiled in contentious debate. Rendering 'umrān as "civilization" thus runs the risk of weighting down the concept of 'umrān with needless ambiguity and thus making it more difficult for readers to understand Ibn Khaldūn's thought.
- 3 – Accordingly, the term "civilization" in the quotations taken from Rosenthal's translation (see note 5 below) will be replaced with "'umrān."

- 4 – In using the concept of “life-world,” I mean something different from how that term is understood in the phenomenological tradition, especially regarding the “life-world” (*Lebenswelt*) that is so central to Husserl’s philosophy. Whereas his life-world emphasizes the field of intersubjective consciousness and meaning, the life-world I have been describing in the context of ‘*umrān*’ is the all-encompassing environment that shapes human nature at the level of the subconscious. The fundamental parameters of this life-world are sociopolitical and socio-economic rather than cultural and intellectual. As a result of this approach, while the phenomenological tradition emphasizes or prioritizes intercultural change in its use of this concept, Ibn Khaldūn’s thought applies said concept for change occurring within the same social structure over different historical periods.
- 5 – Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. into English by Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), vol. 1, pp. 56–57.
- 6 – Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldūn’s Philosophy of History*, p. 184.
- 7 – Ibid., p. 186.
- 8 – Ibid., pp. 184–185.
- 9 – Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, 1:84.
- 10 – Ibid., p. 64.
- 11 – Ibid., p. 71.
- 12 – Ibid.
- 13 – Ibid., p. 13.
- 14 – Ibid., p. 255.
- 15 – Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldūn’s Philosophy of History*, pp. 186–187.
- 16 – Yves Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun: The Birth of History and the Past of the Third World* (London: Verso, 1984), p. 103.
- 17 – M. Kamil Ayad, *Die Geschichts- und Gesellschaftslehre Ibn Ḥaldūns* (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta’sche Buchhandlung Nachfolger, 1930), pp. 203–204.
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- 19 – Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, 2:300–301.
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- 29 – Ibid., p. 92.
- 30 – Ibid., pp. 89–93.
- 31 – Hayati Hökelekli, “Fıtrat,” *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1996), XIII, p. 47.
- 32 – Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldūn Ibn Khaldūn’s Philosophy of History*, p. 195.
- 33 – Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, 1:253–254.
- 34 – Ibid., p. 254.
- 35 – Ibid., p. 291.
- 36 – Ibid., 2:416.
- 37 – Ibid., 1:258; see also 1:283 and 2:318.
- 38 – Ibid., 1:58.
- 39 – Ibid., p. 249.
- 40 – Ibid.
- 41 – Ibid.
- 42 – Ibid., 2:292.
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- 44 – Ibid., p. 296.
- 45 – I borrow this analogy from Fred Dallmayr, who refers to “civilization” rather than *‘umrān*. See Fred Dallmayr, *Dialogue among Civilizations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 17.
- 46 – M. Akif Kayapınar, “Modern Siyaset Tasavvurunun Mekanizmacı Arkaplanı,” *Divan* 35 (2013): 1–42.
- 47 – Taylor, “Atomism,” pp. 29–50.
- 48 – See Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *Civilizations in World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2010).

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