# Asabiyyah

***What Ibn Khaldun, the Islamic father of social science, can teach us about the world today***

**by Ed West**

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## Introduction

As the Emperor of Japan might have said, the war on terror has developed not necessarily to our advantage. Regime change in Iraq and Libya, and western half-interference in Syria, has led to hundreds of thousands of deaths, widespread sectarian cleansing, the destruction of religious minorities and the takeover of the countries by groups condemned even by al-Qaeda for being too extreme. Perhaps never before has a country waged a war, without losing, in which none of its objectives were achieved and the opposing country was left in the hands of a far more dangerous and hateful enemy. It could be likened to going to war with Imperial Germany in 1914 and ending it in 1918 with the Nazis in charge.

A quarter of a century after the end of Communism swept away the ideological conflict of the 'short 20th century', [i] a new world is once again taking shape, this time out of the ashes of the Middle East's post-Ottoman states. But what does the crisis in the region, and its refugee exodus into Europe, signify for the future? And why has the noble dream of nation-building failed?

Great changes make us wish to understand the world better. After the fall of the Berlin Wall came Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man,* published in 1992, which saw the defeat of Communism as the final triumph of liberal democracy. The following year Samuel Huntingdon's essay *The Clash of Civilizations* (later expanded into a book) viewed the world in terms of competing religious-based super-cultures. More recently there has been a fashion to explain the relative success and failures of different societies through their institutions, while among western intellectuals there has been a tendency to see nation-states as outdated in an interdependent, borderless world. And with the Iraq disaster, the rise of China, and Russia's return to authoritarianism, there came a number of works arguing that, contrary to Fukuyama, democracy is in retreat.

Focusing mainly on religion, ideology or economics, most analysis ignores one crucial factor – *asabiyyah*, or group feeling – something outlined six and a half centuries ago by a largely ignored Arab historian called Ibn Khaldun. *Asabiyyah* is an essential component of human society and development, and is the key to understanding why some states fail and others succeed, why democracy works sometimes but often not, and why the nation-state will remain the foundation of human society. Whatever happens from now on, the outcome of the 21st century will be dependent on *asabiyyah*, which remains the fundamental reality of human existence.

## Chapter 1

## The science of culture

Born in Tunis on May 27, 1332, the great historian's full name was Abu Zayd 'Abdu r-Rahman bin Muhammad bin Khaldun Al-Hadrami al-Ishbili but he came to be known (thankfully) as simply Ibn Khaldun, after a distant ancestor. In his lifetime he pioneered the fields of sociology and history, as well as touching on economics, and served as an ambassador and supreme justice in North Africa, travelling across the Islamic Mediterranean from southern Spain to Arabia, eventually dying in Egypt in 1406. His history book *The Muqaddimah* puts him up with Herodotus and Thucydides as one of the fathers of that discipline, while the Scottish theologian Robert Flint once said that 'Plato, Aristotle and Augustine were not his peers, and all others were unworthy of being even mentioned along with him'. Jonathan Sacks, the former British chief rabbi, said of Ibn Khaldun that 'He has every claim to be called the world's first sociologist. Not for another 300 years would the West produce a figure of comparable originality.' [ii]

Ibn Khaldun was very much a product of the pan-Islamic world, which was then coming to the end of its golden age. His family had originated in southern Arabia in the 9th century before moving to Spain, although they may have originally been Berbers who adopted an Arab identity in order to acquire status. They had fled from Seville following its capture by the Christians in 1248 and his family held office under the Berber Hafsid dynasty that had come to power in North Africa in 1229, but his father and grandfather had retired from public life – and Ibn Khaldun's turbulent life would suggest their decision to be wise.

As a boy, Ibn Khaldun was taught by some of the best scholars in the Maghreb, learning the Koran as well as Islamic law, grammar, rhetoric, mathematics and philosophy. Among the Muslim thinkers he studied were Avicenna, the eleventh-century author of the *Book of Healing* who produced hundreds of works during the peak of Islamic intellectual flourishing; Averroes, the great philosopher of medieval Cordoba, who promoted the work of Aristotle; and the Iranian Fakhruddin Razi, who first posited the multiverse hypothesis in the 12th century. Ibn Khaldun would also have read much Greek philosophy, which had been translated into Arabic in Mesopotamia by Syriac-speaking Christians fluent in both languages.

The Hafsids were the latest in a series of Arab and Berber dynasties that had come to power in North Africa as the strength of previous rulers had faded, until their burst of energy eventually burned out in turn, a cycle that would influence Ibn Khaldun's thinking. The Hafsid kingdom occupied modern-day Tunisia and parts of Algeria and Libya, with its capital in Tunis, built close to the site of old Carthage, and would last until the late 16th century, when the Ottoman Turks conquered the area.

The 14th century was a turbulent period across the Mediterranean as the rapidly advancing European civilization was checked by a series of disastrous famines and diseases. Worst of all was the Great Pestilence, or – as it was later called – the Black Death, which was brought west by Italian merchant ships and killed between a third and one-half of the continent's population. It also affected North Africa, and in 1348, the same year it reached England, the disease hit Tunis, and Ibn Khaldun lost both his parents.

Soon after, at the age of 20, Ibn Khaldun began an eventful political career, working for the Tunisian ruler Ibn Tafrakin as a 'katibe al-Alamah', a job that consisted of writing in calligraphy the introductory notes of documents. It was here that he acquired his first taste of the workings of court and of government, which he later defined as 'an institution that prevents injustice other than such as it commits itself'.

Not long after, however, another strongman moved on Tunis and made himself sultan – and the young Ibn Khaldun headed west to Fez. Within a few years he was caught up in plots against the ruler there and was sentenced to 22 months in prison. As luck would have it, the sultan soon died and Ibn Khaldun was released by his successor the following year and given a ministerial position. His next adventure saw him move to Granada, which today still stands as a majestic testimony to Moorish architecture. At this time it was the last Islamic holdout in Iberia, which had been undergoing a slow, steady Christian *Reconquista* since the Muslims were checked by the Frankish leader, Charles Martel, at Tours in 732. The young sultan Nasrid Muhammad V entrusted Ibn Khaldun with a diplomatic mission to Pedro the Cruel, the Christian King of Castile, and so impressed was Pedro by the Arab emissary that he offered to restore his ancestral lands in Spain if he stayed and worked for him. Ibn Khaldun declined the offer, and back in Granada wrote a study of Sufi religious mysticism.

Here, however, Ibn Khaldun suffered from the intrigues of court, and the rivalry of the vizier, the equivalent to chief minister in the Muslim world (in the earlier Persian game of chess the vizier occupies the position later taken by the queen in the European version). The vizier Ibn al-Khatib objected to Ibn Khaldun's wish to mould the young prince into his idea of a wise ruler, and Ibn Khaldun eventually left in 1364 at the invitation of a friend, Abu Abdallah, the deposed sultan of Béjaïa (in what is now Algeria), who had won back his throne. In a strange twist, the prince later had his vizier executed for unorthodoxy, despite Ibn Khaldun pleading for his former rival's life.

Abu Abdallah and Ibn Khaldun had known each other during their stay in prison in Fez, and the new ruler

now employed his old friend in dealing with rebellious Berbers. Despite his own aristocratic origins, Ibn Khaldun seemed to possess a great skill for charming the Berber tribesmen, and consequently sultans in the settled parts of the coast used him on numerous occasions. In 1375 the Sultan of Tlemecen sent him out to meet with the Awlad Arif tribe in the west of modern-day Algeria; they gave the Arab and his young family refuge in a castle near to modern-day Oran, where he spent three years, mainly to escape court intrigue. It was here that he wrote his great book of history over five months in the year 1377, 'with words and ideas pouring into my head like cream into a churn', only returning to Tunis to find the necessary texts for research.

However, Ibn Khaldun soon fell out of favour at court once again and fled to Alexandria, under pretence of going on the Hajj to Mecca (which the ruler, as a Muslim, would have to let him make). He would spend the rest of his days in Egypt, where in 1384 he was made Professor of Islamic jurisprudence. That same year a terrible tragedy befell him when his wife and children were drowned off the coast of Egypt, and the historian decided to go on pilgrimage to Mecca for real. He returned in 1388 and once again got caught up in the poisonous court intrigues, but was still around in 1401 when the Mongols besieged Damascus, the now elderly Ibn Khaldun being called on by the teenage sultan Faraj to accompany him to the city. There, aged 69, he negotiated with the Mongolian leader Timur, a man who even by the standards of Mongol warlords was fairly ferocious (his campaigns are estimated to have killed 17 million people, or five per cent of the world's population, which makes Hitler and Stalin look like bumbling amateurs in comparison).

Timur, better known to us as Tamburlaine and the subject of the Christopher Marlowe play, asked the old Arab about life in the Maghreb and Ibn Khaldun wrote a short history for him. So impressed was Timur that he asked Ibn Khaldun to stay at court with him, but he politely declined, and was allowed to leave unharmed, returning home to write a history of the Mongols.[iii]

Ibn Khaldun spent the last five years of his life in Cairo, dying on March 19, 1406 after being placed under arrest on suspicion of being part of a reformist movement. Despite this rather miserable end, his fame at that point was secured, and he first came to Europe's attention when a biography appeared in French in the 1697 *Bibliothéque Orientale.* Another was published in 1806, and a complete French translation was written in the 1860s.

A great traveler, Ibn Khaldun was taken even further by his imagination; the historian Arnold Toynbee described his historical tome *The Muqaddimah* (literally 'The Introduction' – it was supposed to be part of a larger volume, the *Kitab al-Ibar*, or 'Book of Lessons') as 'undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place'.

Ibn Khaldun charted the story of the world from creation, which began with 'the minerals and progressed, in an ingenious, gradual manner, to plants and animals' and onto human history. Anticipating Darwin, he wrote: 'The animal world then widens, its species become numerous, and, in a gradual process of creation, it finally leads to man, who is able to think and reflect. The higher stage of man is reached from the world of monkeys, in which both sagacity and perception are found, but which has not reached the stage of actual reflection and thinking. At this point we come to the first stage of man.'

Human society, he argued, has laws like any other science and for that reason Ibn Khaldun is widely considered the father of sociology, or as he called it '*ilm al-'umran,* 'the science of culture'. He wrote: 'Human society is necessary since the individual acting alone could acquire neither the necessary food nor security. Only the division of labour, in and through society, makes this possible. The state arises through the need of a restraining force to curb the natural aggression of humanity. A state is inconceivable without a society, while a society is well-nigh impossible without a state. Social phenomena seem to obey laws which, while not as absolute as those governing natural phenomena, are sufficiently constant to cause social events to follow regular and well-defined patterns and sequences.'

He also covered the sphere of economics, among his most famous quotes being that 'it should be known that at the beginning of the dynasty, taxation yields a large revenue from small assessments. At the end of the dynasty, taxation yields a small revenue from large assessments.' This formed part of his essentially cyclical view of history and society, and would inspire the Laffer Curve, as coined by the economist Arthur Laffer in the 1970s, who later credited Ibn Khaldun with the idea.[iv]

## Chapter 2

### The asabiyyah cycle

Most famously, of all his ideas, Ibn Khaldun popularized the notion of *asabiyyah*, a pre-Islamic word that translates as 'group feeling' – solidarity or social cohesion, the literal root being 'nerve', as in the sinew by which a group is held together. It prefigures the concept of social capital that was coined by sociologist LJ Hanifan at the beginning of the 20th century, while Alexis de Tocqueville touched on a similar theme in the 19th. Tunisian historian Mohamed Talbi defined *asabiyyah* as 'the cohesive force of the group', the group's awareness of itself and 'the tension that animates it and impels it ineluctably to seek power through conquest'.

In *The Muqaddimah* Ibn Khaldun described *asabiyyah* as the basic force of history, responsible for the rise and fall of kingdoms and dynasties and the reason why civilizations eventually collapsed. Although he saw the greater scheme of the universe as an almost proto-Darwinian evolutionary process, human history was very much circular, and the rise and fall of kingdoms and dynasties was marked by what he called the '*Asabiyyah* cycle'.

*Asabiyyah* begins with the family and Ibn Khaldun talked about two forms of the *asabiyyah* cycle, the tribal and dynastic, for families and kingdoms alike rise and fall. As Ibn Khadlum prefigured Darwin's theory of evolution in his thinking, in some ways he also foreshadowed his cousin Francis Galton's regression to the mean, where great men fail to produce great sons, and so families go from rags to riches and back again.

The cycle begins with nomadic groups living out in remote regions (or the 'lands of insolence', as the Moroccan rulers rather charmingly called their tribal areas).[v] At this stage, Ibn Khaldun wrote in *The Muqaddimah*, g roup feeling is strong, 'since everybody's affection for his family and his group is more important (than anything else). Compassion and affection for one's blood relations and relatives exists in human nature as something God put into the hearts of men. It makes for mutual support and aid, and increases the fear felt by the enemy.' People without family to defend them 'cannot live in the desert, because they would fall prey to any nation that might want to swallow them up'.

In the earliest days of the cycle the group is held together easily because it is tied by kinship. Ibn Khaldun wrote that 'respect for blood ties is something natural among men, with the rarest exceptions. It leads to affection for one's relations and blood relatives, the feeling that no harm ought to befall them, nor any destruction come upon them. One feels shame when one's relatives are treated unjustly or attacked.

'Group feeling produces the ability to defend oneself, to offer opposition, to protect oneself, and to press one's claims. Whoever loses it is too weak to do any of these things.'

He also wrote that 'strength is obtained only through group feeling which means affection and willingness to fight and die for each other.'

But as these conquering tribes go from nomadism (*badawah*) to civilization (*hadharah*), the natural cohesion fades, and individuals and families begin to look after their own interests. Social solidarity collapses. At some stage kingdoms come to rely on mercenaries or slave armies, which to Ibn Khaldun is sure proof that the dynasty in question no longer commands *asabiyyah*. In the words of one scholar of Ibn Khaldun[vi]: 'When only those compelled or paid to fight will die in your name the end is near.'

Settled, urbanized societies therefore become vulnerable and may be conquered by another group with stronger *asabiyyah*. Thus we have the cycle, from growth to riches to ruin, a process that occurred most famously in the Roman Empire but also within the Islamic world itself; Greeks and Persians were replaced by Arabs who established dynasties in Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo, but who were in turn conquered by Mongols and Turks, while the Berber Almohad dynasty overran the Almoravid in Spain and the Maghreb. Further afield in India and China ancient, settled civilizations were conquered by less sophisticated nomads.[vii]

As a society grows larger and more complex, and i ts inhabitants less closely related and dependent on each other for immediate survival, it needs to be held together by something else, most importantly an ideal. Rome, a vast empire ruling a quarter of the world's inhabitants, lasted as long as it did because its people had a strong idea of themselves, and a developed sense of civic morality; this strengthened Rome's *asabiyyah*. In the latter Roman Empire chroniclers lamented declining social virtues long before the barbarian tribes, technologically and culturally inferior, walked across deserted frontiers and became lords of the western empire. That modern-day Rome, the United States of America, is built on a

corresponding sense of patriotism and public morality – or republican virtue, as the founding fathers called it.

It is a formula of successful societies with strong *asabiyyah*, Ibn Khaldun noted, that they are able to create a sense of themselves, including a mythologized history and institutions, staffed by office holders who are expected to command respect whatever the qualities of the individual.

As Lenn Evan Goodman wrote in his essay 'Ibn Khaldun and Thucydides'[viii] this 'Sublimated *asabiyyah*, the "identification" of individuals with the group such that the y effectively subordinate their atomic interests not to one another' as individuals 'but to one another as office holders' is a 'necessary... social bond for the maintenance of such a society'.

Ibn Khaldun, according to Goodman, believed that such a bond could be achieved by an individual identifying with the group to such an extent that he put its interests, privileges and wealth above his own; and also came to identity his 'own shame, guilt, and responsibility... with those of the group... or of some symbol, individual, institution or ideal representative of the group. The bond of loyalty arising from such identification is recognized by Ibn Khaldun as *asabiyyah* in the broadest sense.'[ix] The passion of the Olympics or World Cup would have made total sense to him.

## Chapter 3

## Brot hers in faith

*Asabiyyah* is strongest in those sharing a common ancestry, but this is not necessary, nor even adequate for such cohesion. *Asabiyyah* starts with the family, Goodman wrote, 'but by various fictions and extensions the relation grows to encompass wider groups, the clan and the tribe; and by skilful management in the hands of the politically adept, it may be transmuted to a bond of loyalty among strangers, a traditional, rational, or charismatic basis for a built-up civilization'.

Goodman argued that Ibn Khaldun 'never conceives [people's] identities as atomic'. Human psychology is group-minded and our motivations are rarely individualistic – we will do what is in the best interests of our children, our brothers, our cousins, our clan or even our tribe, ethnic group or religious community. Or as Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind*, put it, humans are nine-tenths chimpanzee, one-tenth bee.

In the human brain oxytocin, often called the love hormone or 'cuddle chemical', produces 'parochial altruism', that is a great willingness to protect those close to us but an indifference to outsiders. Haidt cites an experiment involving Dutch men playing economic games in groups, where those given oxytocin spray made less selfish decisions and cared more for helping their group – but 'showed no concern at all for improving the outcomes of men in the other groups'.

In follow-up studies, 'the authors found that oxytocin caused Dutch men to like Dutch names more and to value saving Dutch lives more… Over and over again the researchers looked for signs that this increased in-group love would be paired with increased out-group hate (toward Muslims), but they failed to find it. Oxytocin simply makes people love their in-group more. It makes them parochial altruists.'[x]

We have a natural instinct towards helping people closely related to us, as great biologists such as William Hamilto n and Richard Dawkins have argued. John Maynard Smith coined the phrase 'kin selection' to describe our preference towards aiding family members, while Dawkins popularized the idea of 'the selfish gene' (which is, contrary to some misinterpretations, about our tendency towards altruism, not selfishness).

But although we are more likely to be closely related to a compatriot than a foreigner, compared to the difference between family members and non-kin it is likely to be very small indeed; on top of this, patriotism is racially inclusive to some degree, at least in western countries. The difference we feel must surely be somewhat synthetic; in other words, the product of *asabiyyah*.

Until relatively recently humans lived in small bands of no more than 150 people, almost all of whom would have been related, and how our species managed to expand into much larger societies from about 10,000 years ago without fracturing remains something of a mystery. In evolutionary terms it is a very short period in which to so fundamentally change our way of life. No other member of the ape family could tolerate such large groups without ripping each other's heads off, and despite what you may read in the newspapers, human beings do a pretty good job of tolerating each other.

One of the most likely explanations for our ability to work in such numbers is religion, which builds cohesion within a group and discourages violence, theft and other destructive behaviour. On top of this, religion also influences *asabiyyah* by various means, such as the development of creation narratives that help people to see themselves as one group, and bonding rituals, seen in everything from animist chanting to Catholic Masses (which may increase oxytocin as well as bringing us closer to our creator).

Religion is extremely powerful, precisely because it can mimic the oxytocin-inducing feelings of fraternity that are usually only found in closely related groups. Islamic fighters from Sussex will lay down their lives alongside Chechens or Algerians with whom they have no blood link, nor any real cultural similarity aside from Islam. This is nothing new: the twelfth-century crusader Fulcher of Chartres wrote of his experiences fighting the Muslims that 'if a Breton or German wished to ask me something, I was completely unable to reply. But although we were divided by language, we seemed to be like brothers in the love of God and like near neighbours of one mind.'[xi]

It is an imagined community, in Benedict Anderson's famous phrase, but the human imagination is powerful.

According to Ara Norenzayan's study of the evolution of religion, *Big Gods*, faith played a pivotal part in the shift from small tight-knit bands – *gemeinschaft*, or community – to large, anonymous groups – *gesellschaft*, or civil society. As he writes, the self-control emphasized by most major faiths 'contributes to religion's capacity for effective social coordination and suppression of selfishness in the interest of the

group'. This is just how Ibn Khaldun described the shift from *badawah* to *hadharah*.

There is most likely a trade-off involved with the size and genetic and cultural variation within a population and its internal solidarity. Larger groups enjoy many advantages, not just culturally and socially but biologically, too; but conversely there is evidence that societies with limited diversity have stronger cohesion. One study in Switzerland found that in cantons with genetically more homogenous populations, where kinship ties are strong, people rely on the state less.[xii] This is also reflected in corruption levels in homogenous versus diverse societies, with countries such as Denmark and Sweden at one end and African, Middle Eastern and Latin American countri es at the other.[xiii] Greater genetic and cultural diversity is also associated with higher levels of mistrust,[xiv] corruption, inequality and violence.

However, religion, and in particular the moralistic Abrahamic faiths Judaism, Christianity and Islam, encou rage the social behaviour that helps internal cohesion. That is why religious communes in the US last on average three times as long as secular ones,[xv] while people in religious kibbutzim have been shown to be more generous towards each other than those in secular ones. The same pattern of religion and altruism is found among Afro-Brazilians and Muslims in India.[xvi] In Britain the Institute of Fiscal Studies looked at declining generosity towards charities from 1974 to 1994 and found that religion, not poverty, was the deciding factor. [xvii]

As Ibn Khaldun said: 'Religious propaganda gives a dynasty at its beginning another power in addition to that of the group feeling it possessed as the result of the number of its supporters.' He saw that 'religious colouring does away with mutual jealousy and envy among people who share in a group feeling, and causes concentration upon the truth… They are willing to die for their objectives.'

And social cohesion, as it would now be called, also explains the military success of religious people. As Norenzayan writes: 'Groups with high trust are, all else being equal, politically and militarily more potent, and able to directly impose their beliefs on others through political coercion and warfare.' Extravagant displays of self-sacrifice, from fasting to martyrdom, 'are a powerful mechanic for reducing religious hypocrisy and building trust, which, combined with supernatural monitoring, have given pro social religious groups an edge over rival groups'.

Such religious communities treat each other as 'fictive kin', a phrase popularized by evolutionary scientist Randolph Ness. Ness pointed out that: 'Among the Hebrews and Phoenicians... the worshipper is called brother (that is, kinsman) or sister of the god.'[xviii]

Christians also describe their faith as a brotherhood, while the global fraternity of Islam is called *ikhwan,* literally 'brothers'. The Latin word used in Cathol ic liturgy, *Consors*, means 'sharing property with one (as brother, sister, relative)', derived from *con* (with) and *sors* (fate). [xix]

Such internal cohesion also comes with the possibility of external hostility towards unbelievers, which is why religion causes co-operation and conflict, 'both the fire departmen t and the arsonist', in Norenzayan's phrase; or as Homer Simpson said of alcohol, religion is 'the cause of, and solution to, all of life's problems'.

The advantage held by cohesive societies has been noted down the years. As Charles Darwin wrote in *The Descent of Man*: 'There can be no doubt that a tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over other tribes; and this would be natural selection.'

And as Norenzayan notes: 'Groups that develop or acquire cultural traits that are conductive to social solidarity while maintaining large size outcompete groups lacking these traits.' The best way is through religion, and without such social solidarity they may be in trouble, or as Ibn Khaldun put it: 'The people of the worldly dynasty come to abandon each other, since they are afraid of death. Therefore, they do not offer resistance to the people with a religious colouring, even if they themselves are more numerous.'

'This happened to the Arabs at the beginning of Islam', Ibn Khadlun wrote, when at al-Qadisiyyah 30,000 Muslims defeated a Persian army of some 120,000 and then a Byzantine force of up to 400,000. (Military statistics from this period should be taken with a pinch of salt, but at any rate the Muslims won.) And the Arab conquests were long lasting because their faith kept them together even after the death of their charismatic founder: 'The group feeling of the Arabs was consolidated in Islam through the prophethood of Muhammad with which God honoured them.'

But when the 'religious colouring changes and is destroyed… The power of the ruling dynasty is then wiped out,' he wrote. The smaller groups win 'with the help of the additional power that religion had given it'.

Societies can maintain *asabiyyah* as they expand through a unifying ideology, in particular religion but also secular patriotism. We tend to imagine barbarians sacking late Roman cities and killing their inhabitants, but invading clans often need the help of civilized city dwellers who have the literacy and

knowledge to help them rule. Modern western Europe originated with invading German tribes adopting the religion of the Roman provinces they had overrun (if they were not already Christians, as many were); forging a cultural alliance with native churchmen, one that allowed the German tribal leaders to better control their new kingdoms. The unifying ideology – in this case Christianity – gave their new societies greater *abasiyyah*.

Indeed *asabiyyah* can be maintained, or even expanded, once a tribe has grown; smaller groups can be absorbed but their identities have to be subsumed enough to prevent tit-for-tat violence, clannishness and political corruption. If that happens they can even add to the *asabiyyah* of the larger group. Says Ibn Khaldun: 'Group feeling is something composite that results from [the amalgamation of] many groups, one of which is stronger than the others. This group feeling is able to overcome and gain power over [all the others] and eventually brings them all under its sway.'

Belief acts as a social adhesive, and when social cohesion slips, people interpret it as a result of declining religious observance, and dissatisfaction from the almighty. Throughout history people have viewed defeat at the hands of invading barbarians as punishment from God; such an explanation occurs in the Old Testament and was often used later by Christians. Gildas, the rather depressed British monk of the 6th century who chronicled the former Roman province's collapse at the hands of the invading Saxons, blamed defeat on their having deserted God. Three centuries later and the Anglo-Saxons themselves, now Christian, faced almost total conquest by the pagan Norsemen and in turn, citing Gildas, connected it all to their own sinfulness. The Northumbrian monk Alcuin attributed the Viking raids to 'fornicating, adultery and incest' by nuns, as well as short beards, luxurious clothes and even foxhunting by the clergy. Quoting the prophet Jeremiah, he said: 'Then the Lord said unto me, Out of the north an evil shall break forth on all inhabitants of the land.'

Today we find such divine explanations far-fetched, but it can simply be interpreted as declining *asabiyyah*; people abandoning God can be another way of saying they have lost their attachment to the group and its struggles, and instead turned to selfish pursuits. This would make them vulnerable to less sophisticated but more cohesive barbarians.

## Chapter 4

## Campanilismo

As a rule, the English are not a very family-orientated people. Social life lacks the warmth of the Mediterranean world with its joyful and welcoming extended families. In contrast, many English people don't especially like their relatives or are apathetic towards them. My father never took much interest in his relations, many of whom are fascinating, lovely people, and it was largely left to my Irish mother to maintain a connection. Meanwhile her family have always been close and this extends to first and second cousins in the more traditional west of Ireland. To the English, although family connections do count, they matter less, and associations with a school, club or other institution define them more.

Yet despite there being no big fat English weddings with lots of relations called Nigel or Rupert, there are great advantages to a society with weak family connections. It is not a total coincidence that it was in England that clubs first took off in the 17th century, playing an important role in the country's political and economic growth; in specific cases clubs allowed inventors to meet investors, but they also helped expand the general levels of trust. Countries that are not clannish tend to have far more clubs, institutions and other organizations that are collectively called 'civil society'. In contrast societies with strong families tend towards low civic capital and in consequence higher corruption. This is reflected in the political cultures of different states.

*Asabiyyah*, therefore, can work in two ways; the group feeling can lie at the nationwide level, or it can exist within tribes, clans or religious communities, and this has a profound effect on a state's institutions and how well a democracy can function.

At the other end of the spectrum to the English are the Bedouin, whose famous phrase 'me and my brother against my cousin, me and my cousin against the world' reflects concentric circles of trust, one limited to family members.

Mark Weiner wrote in *The Rule of the Clan* about countries governed by 'clannism' that: 'These societies possess the outward trappings of a modern state but are founded on informal patronage networks, especially those of kinship, and traditional ideals of patriarchal family authority. In nations pervaded by clannism, government is co-opted for purely factional purposes.'

In these societies, especially in the Middle East and Africa, 'the nuclear family, with its revolutionary, individuating power, has yet to replace the extended lineage group as the principle framework for kinship or household organization'.[xx]

Clannish states have little sense of wider civic asabiyyah and therefore civic responsibility. Indeed, as social anthropologist Stanley Kurtz wrote, tribes were used to preying on others: 'Once a particularly powerful tribe or tribal coalition actually captured a state, they simply routinized their predation under official guise. (Saddam and his Sunni tribal allies fit the bill.) The state, such as it is in the Middle East, offers but a thin alternative to "the war of all against all". Too weak to provide public utilities, policing, or impartial justice, most Middle Eastern states are just reincarnations of the predatory, winner-take-all tribal coalitions of old. Why exchange the protection of your family, tribe, or sect for submission to a weak or predatory state?'

The relationship between this type of state and the tribal peasant, wrote Philip Carl Salzman of McGill University in Canada, 'is that of the shepherd to his flock: the state fleeces the peasants, making a living off of them, and protects them from other predators, so that they may be fleeced again'. Salzman describes such clan-based states as 'cliques determined to impose their power for the pleasure of dominance and the profit of extortion'.

The inevitable result of clannism is kin-based corruption whereby resources, positions and other rewards are monopolised within family groups. Nepotism is found wherever humans are, but is far more widespread in clannish societies, and this affects both a country's corruption levels and its ability to sustain democracy.[xxi]

Arab countries tend to have *asabiyyah* within a group but not the wider society, for *asabiyyah* can be a double-edged sword, a source of division as well as unity, both clannishness (as it is sometimes translated into English) and social solidarity. According to *Mod ern Middle East Authoritarianism: Roots, Ramifications, and Crisis,* 'this type of *asabiyyah* was particularly visible in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, mainly within the security and intelligence apparatuses. It is obvious today in the republican-style authoritarian regime of Assad. We also find *asabiyyah* applied in the Arab Gulf countries, led by large families who dominate "departments of sovereignty" (*wizarat as-seyadah*), meaning all key positions in the state.'[xxii]

According to Malise Ruthven, in the preface to a 2013 edition of Albert Hourani's classic *A History of the Arab Peoples*: 'In general, social identities rooted in family or clan tend to be more durable than those

based in the formalities of a public office. Despite the overlay of mode rn systems of government and administration *asabiyyah* has proved a remarkably persistent phenomenon.'

Clannishness, or 'negative' *asabiyyah*, is closely tied up with an institution widespread in the Middle East but almost nonexistent in the west – cousin marriage. Two months before the 2003 invasion of Iraq there appeared an essay, selected by Steven Pinker for that year's *The Best American Science and Nature Writing,* by Californian journalist Steve Sailer. In the article, called 'Cousin Marriage Conundrum', Sailer made an original, and almost eccentric, argument, for why democracy in Iraq would fail – its high rates of cousin marriage.[xxiii] Noting that between 46 and 53 per cent of Iraqis married first or second cousins, he suggested: 'By fostering intense family loyalties and strong nepotistic urges, inbreeding makes the development of civil society more difficult.' Not only was the country divided between Kurds in the north, Sunni Arabs in the centre and Shia in the south, 'but that's just a top-down summary of Iraq's ethnic make-up. Each of those three ethnic groups is divisible into smaller and smaller tribes, clans, and inbred extended families – each with their own alliances, rivals, and feuds. And the engine at the bottom of these bedevilling social divisions is the oft-ignored institution of cousin marriage.'

In total there are around 150 tribes in Iraq, comprised of 2,000 or so clans. At least 25 per cent of marriages are between first cousins,[xxiv] and a 2005 UN-funded report suggested that 34 per cent of unions were between paternal relatives, with another 15 per cent involving maternal relations.[xxv] Saddam came from the al-Bu Nasir tribe, a group of some 25,000 people based around the town of Tikrit in Sunni central Iraq, and his regime wa s filled with members of the tribe, with whom he shared a great deal of trust (although non-Muslims, being dependent on a strong leader to protect them and unable to reach the top, also enjoyed some limited favour, and his foreign minister Tariq Aziz was a Christian).

Saddam's politics were mired in blood, in both senses: in 1957 the 20-year-old had joined the revolutionary Ba'ath ('Resurrection') Party, following his uncle and future father-in-law, Kharaillah Tulfha, who had fought against the British in the Second World War, for Saddam also married his first cousin. (Although he later took a second wife, and at a party thrown by the Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, Saddam's charming eldest son Uday stabbed to death the president's food taster, another Christian, who had introduced the two.)[xxvi]

Indeed there is some research on the effect of cousin marriage on government. A 2012 study by Michael A Woodley and Edward Bell, called 'Consanguinity as a Major Predictor of Levels of Democracy: A Study of 70 Nations'[xxvii] found that, 'where consanguineous kinsh ip networks are numerically predominant and have been made to share a common statehood, democracy is unlikely to develop'. There is also a strong link between a country's corruption levels, as measured by groups such as Transparency International, and the rate of cousin marriage (Iraq was placed 170th out of 175 in Transparency's index in its mos t recent year).[xxviii]

Before the invasion Western analysis of the region barely noted the importance of kinship in political bonds, the focus instead being on economic, ideological or religious arguments that were more understandable to Europeans and Americans.

Yet there are plenty of people who could have argued otherwi se. Sailer cited retired US Army colonel Norvell De Atkine, who had trained Middle Eastern armies in combat techniques and had written an article in *American Diplomacy* magazine called 'Why Arabs Lose Wars'.[xxix] Colonel De Atkine argued that the lack of trust among Arabs for people outside their own family affected army offensives because 'the manoeuvre element must be confident that supporting units or arms are providing covering fire. If there is a lack of trust in that support, getting troops moving forward against dug-in defenders is possible only by officers getting out front and leading, something t hat has not been a characteristic of Arab leadership.'

Arab national armies are notorious for losing wars, the most famous and grating examples being Israel's spectacular victories in 1948 and 1967 against huge odds. In the former a state of 700,000 war-weary Jews with little outside support beat Arab forces from countries with a combined population of 30 million people. In the Six-Day War of 1967 Israelis recall Egyptian soldiers throwing away their boots so they could run quicker across the Sinai desert (although in 1973 the Egyptians performed much better, to their enemy's great surprise).

Significantly, in Mosul in June 2014 the well-armed Iraqi army totally fled from a far smaller Islamist group ISIS, leaving a huge pile of lethal weaponry in the hands of their conquerors. The army had received funding of $25.5billion from the US and had in total 800,000 troops, over 4,000 armored vehicles, 137 helicopters and 357 tanks. In Mosul itself they had more than 20,000 soldiers, while ISIS had only 300,[xxx] out of a total force consisting of just 10,000 men possessing only machine guns and rocket launchers.[xxxi]

But Arabs aren't cowards and their non-state armies do not share this poor record; on the contrary, Arab militias united by religious faith are marked by extreme bravery, and Bashar Assad has held out in the Syrian Civil War with the help of the Lebanese Shia militant group Hezbollah. In contrast, against ISIS the Iraqi army was fighting for Iraq, and Iraq ha s little group feeling; it's why as a state this ancient land,

the home of civilization itself, has been marred by corruption and division.

The cousin marriage question was taken up by Stanley Kurtz in the *National Review* in 2007, in an article in which he wrote: 'Instead of encouraging cultural exchange, forging alliances, and mitigating tensions among competing groups, parallel-cousin marriage tends to wall off groups from one another and to encourage conflict between and among them. However strong the urge among anthropologists to identify the cooperative advantages of exogamy [marrying out] as a core characteristic of human nature itself, the hard fact of the matter is that a significant minority of human societies have chosen to organize themselves according to principles quite the opposite of alliance-based exogamy.'

Kurtz cited nineteenth-century British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, who developed the study of kinship. In Tylor's view early groups discovered intermarriage as the path to social peace, a feature of medieval European history where brides were exchanged between warring clans, tribes and kingdoms.

But there are also benefits to endogamy, or marrying in – namely solidarity. In 1989, Czech anthropologist Ladislav Holy published *Kinship, Honour, and Solidarity: Cousin Marriage in the Middle East*, in which he suggested that parallel-cousin marriage (marriage between the children of a sibling of the same sex, but usually in practice males) was designed not to protect resources but in-group solidarity and therefore 'honour' (in this case the phrase 'honour killing' might be better translated as 'solidarity killing').

The downside is that it remains unlikely that a society beset by such clannism will make the transition to European-style democracy.

Southern Europe, although not as clannish as the Middle East, generally has stronger family units than the north. Italians have a great sense of *campanilismo*, literally 'bell tower', a concept that translates as a sense of concentric loyalty, firstly to one's village (with its church bell tower), *commune*, followed by province, region and only then nation. Rural France traditionally had a similar concept, of attachment to one's *cloche*, but *campanilismo* is a word with no English translation, nor any equivalent in Dutch, German or the Scandinavian languages. The closest would be *lokalpatriots*, the Norwegian version of 'community minded' in English, that is someone who cares about their neighbourhood and its upkeep, but has no visceral feeling for it to rival national loyalty.

An example of this north-south clash features in *The Godfather: Part II* when Michael Corleone enlists to fight for the US Army in the Second World War, a period of peak social capital in America. His Sicilian family, originating in a society with low trust, berate him, his brother Sonny saying that men who enlist are 'a bunch of saps because they risk their lives for strangers'. As he tells his sibling: 'Your country ain't your blood.' To millions of Germans, Britons and Americans fighting in that conflict, that was not how they saw it.

And people who don't consider their country their blood will not fight for it.

A few weeks after ISIS took Mosul, the female politician Umayyah Naji Jabara was killed in the fighting, although she was a Sunni Muslim like her Islamist enemies.[xxxii] In this she was following in the footsteps of her father, Sheikh Naji Jabara, who had been assassinated with a car bomb by al-Qaeda in Iraq. He had been leader of a branch of the *Sahwa*, or Awakening Councils, a coalition of Sunni tribes that had fought the more extreme insurgents during the American occupation. Umayyah's uncle was also killed earlier in the year fighting ISIS.

After the Mosul debacle it was left to the Kurds, who have long campaigned for independence, to take control of a number of disputed areas in northern Iraq while seeking international help against ISIS; their *peshmerga* have since fought valiantly and won the Kurdish nation many admirers around the world. Meanwhile Iraq's embattled Shia president Nouri al-Maliki sacked the head of the army and installed a replacement – his son Ahmad.

Nation-building failed in tribal Iraq, and future generations may marvel at the naivety of those who thought such an idea could succeed. Even after the Mesopotamian tragedy, though, the optimism of western leaders and thinkers has been surprisingly sturdy. The 'Arab Spring' was met with a certain lack of scepticism, its name reminiscent of movements in eastern Europe, suggesting a positive, hopeful change and one that would end in democracy – when there was clearly little reason to believe this to be the case. This perhaps reflects the polite fictions by which people in the western media are supposed to abide.

According to Stanley Kurtz, writing in the *Weekly Standard*, westerners purposely ignored the tribal nature of Arab society for political reasons, influenced by Edward Said's *Orientalism* and anthropologist Emrys Peters, who argued that conflict in the region was not about who was related to whom, but about resources.[xxxiii] 'With many anthropologists already drawn to Marxism in the 1970s, Peters's theory found a receptive audience,' Kurtz wrote. In reality Darwin trumps Marx every time.

## Chapter 5

## Asabiyyah and sovereignty

Today there is little interest in studying what effect 'group feeling' has on the relative success and failures of societies, while Ibn Khaldun is largely unknown in the west. It is partly that *asabiyyah* is hard to measure, and it may be a result of the domina tion of individualistic English-speaking peoples, who tend to underestimate the extent to which humans are motivated by group interests. It is also perhaps true that the west has overlooked Arab philosophers, to our great loss.

Yet Ibn Khaldun has many lessons for us: one of which is that established nation-states, where clan and family power has been crushed, have enormous advantages because of *asabiyyah*. The best historical example of peak *asabiyyah* was perhaps the United States of the middle 20th century, a society with very high levels of trust, strong institutions, virtually zero cousin marriage (even in the Deep South) and very low corruption levels. Few would deny that those things have deteriorated since, and trust in particular has fallen in the US at an alarming rate.[xxxiv]

Why is it, therefore, so difficult to repeat America's success in other countries, to nation-build? Current political thinking about the world often ignores differences in human societies and assumes individuals are simply transferable units, without taking into account group feeling.

Arab states are weak because of *asabiyyah*, and European ones strong because of *asabiyyah* . As King Faisal I of Iraq said of his subjects, they are 'devoid of any patriotic idea' and 'connected by no common tie'.[xxxv] In Europe this patriotism took centuries to build, and grew slowly and organically around a sovereign. Democracy may grow in the Middle East, but its best prospects are probably in small states with relatively enlightened monarchies, rather than in revolutionary republics built on nothing but mindless optimism, because it will be easier to establish legitimacy, and legitimacy is at the heart of *asabiyyah*.

Before democracy can flour ish, legitimacy must first be established, and until then the ballot box can be dangerous. As the United Arab Emirates ambassador Omar Saif Ghobash explained in a 2014 lecture to the Foreign Policy Research Institute, 'despite the virtues of democracy, it can be divisive – much more so when it is coupled with Islamism'.[xxxvi] Arab democracy was vulnerable, he argued, not just because of religious radicalism but 'also because of the lack of institutions that can rise above partisan politics. When every Minister who is elected, in a country like Iraq, evicts the existing staff and replaces them with his or her own partisans, the stakes in an election are raised very high.'

Noting that 'electoral democracy that precedes the development of effective, impartial institut ions may exacerbate tribal and sectarian divisions', Ambassador Ghobash observed: 'Even the voting in something as apparently innocuous as a regional poetry competition in the UAE often takes place along tribal lines. This does not mean that western style democratic processes will never happen; simply that overnight changes in civil relationships are fraught with dangers.'

Without institutions and group feeling, a state lacks sovereignty, and Ibn Khaldun understood that sovereignty was central to political stability: he wrote that 'Royal authority exists only through group feeling', and that sovereignty and legitimacy depend on *asabiyyah,* 'a shared loyalty and partisanship possessed by entire clans or peoples'.[xxxvii] Such 'royal authority', which one might today call political legitimacy, does not spring from nowhere but is an intangible force that comes from mutual consent of the ruled (or at least most of them). By what authority does a king or, for that matter, a modern government, derive its power? This was the question asked by King Charles I at his trial in Westminster Hall at the end of the English Civil War, yet although the regicides lacked legitimacy in the eyes of many, all the king could argue was that God had given him the right to rule over his subjects. He was a man of his time, for towards the end of the medieval period, once monarchs had come to crush the power of the barons, they justified de facto power by invoking the Almighty. Today 'the people' are sovereign, and so democracy or the 'democratic will' is invoked. Yet this is inadequate or even dangerous where an ethnically-divided and clannish society uses voting as a tribal head count, and the will of the majority is to remove the freedoms of a minority, or when the people lack the *asabiyyah* to give its government legitimacy; a simple majority in an assembly does not give a regime or state genuine authority. Only *asabiyyah* can do that.

Breaking the power of the clan was a necessity even in the very first democracy, ancient Athens, where in 508-7 BC the great reformer Cleisthenes reorganized the four traditional tribes into ten new ones, based on 30 *trittyes*, or political regions, which were themselves broken up to reduce the power of local clans. He also removed patronymics as names, replacing them with demonyms, so that 'X son of Y' would instead become 'X of Z district'.[xxxviii] All of this was done in order to weaken clannishness and so make democracy possible. More recently, several American states banned the practice of cousin marriage as a way of undermining clannishness among immigrant groups.

Like Thucydides, Ibn Khaldun saw history as being part of a cyclical, not linear process. Yet neo-conservatism, as with many western ideas, came to regard history as an unstoppable march from

backwardness to progress, and democracy as an inevitable destination for the human race. It might not turn out that way, though. As the historians Tim Stanley and Alexander Lee wrote of *The End of History* in the *Atlantic* 25 years after the fall of Communism:[xxxix] 'As many critics pointed out, Fukuyama's logic was a bit too reminiscent of the pseudo-Hegelian historical determinism that Marxists and Fascists deployed to disastrous effect earlier in the 20th century.

'It was the great liberal philosopher Karl Popper who first exposed the weaknesses of historicism as a mode of political justification in his devastating critique of Marxist and fascist determinism. It is ironic that his arguments now apply to the liberalism he sought to defend.'

Contrary to mainstream thinking both on Left and Right, history is not ending and the nation-state is not going away; groups with a strong national identity will have an advantage over those that don't, illustrated by the Kurdish army's far better performance against ISIS than the Iraqi forces, divided along tribal and sectarian grounds. Group loyalties – nationalism being one – are also necessary for the civic virtue that democracy depends on. Patriotism doesn't necessarily have to be about blood or faith, but it does have to involve *asabiyyah*.

This idea of the end of history is often cited by supporters of the European Union, an institution that sought to replace the nation-state but which is wracked by corruption and a lack of cohesion. The EU has a very Khaldunian urge to expand – it must do this in order to maximise the risks for any European nation wishing to stay outside of it – but as it gets bigger its *asabiyyah* will fall even further, and its corruption levels will grow. Seeing a 'country' of 500 million people as being ten times as powerful as one of 50 million ignores the impact of *asabiyyah*.

Sometimes small really is beautiful, and most of the richest countries in the world are fairly tiny; this is as true of businesses as of nations, with many mergers and takeovers ending badly, and predictions of great economies of scale failing to materialize. Indeed as the *Economist* reported in October 2014, today family-run firms are as successful in big business as ever, comprising a record 19 per cent of the Fortune Global 500.[xl] Companies have their own *asabiyyah* cycle; as with empires, they rise to become seemingly unstoppable market leaders before declining or collapsing from a lack of cohesion. The likes of Kodak, General Motors, Nokia and Yahoo are testimony to this.

## Chapter 6

## A society of strangers

Although *asabiyyah* is strongest in small groups, as Ibn Khaldun noted, it can be maintained in larger societies by a religious idea. Evolutionary psychology suggests that faith reduces infighting and mimics the effects of kinship, fooling our brain into thinking our fellow believers are blood relations. But with religion in decline, can secular id eals have the same effect? Perhaps, but it's also possible that the collapse of religious belief could also herald the latter stages of the *asabiyyah* cycle.

Likewise, greater diversity within a society presents a strain on group feeling. The United States was a country of large-scale immigration from the 1840s, but it had a national idea as strong as Rome, and because of this was able to maintain its *asabiyyah* despite waves of migrants (it also experienced an immigration 'pause' from 1924 and 1965). As Ibn Khaldun wrote: 'A person of a certain descent may become attached to people of another descent... such a person comes to be known as having the same descent as those to whom he is attached and is counted one of them with respect to the things that result from common descent, such as affection, the rights and obligations concerning law and bloody money, and so on.' In this he describes successful integration by immigrants who add to their new community's wider *asabiyyah*.

Yet this ability has arguably been lost, and the United States has found integrating more recent immigrants far harder. As with other western countries, it has gone down the path of multiculturalism, encouraging minorities to prize their own cultures above the common one; the people have lost their group feeling.

And attempts to create a new identity disconnected from a shared ancestral past, and based on a set of common values, are beset by contradictions. *Asabiyyah*, by its nature, must be voluntary, a matter of shared history, mythology and hormones, or what Abraham Lincoln called 'the mystic chords of memory'. Once it is forced on people, and civic duty is replaced by a mere fear of the law or other repercussions, then 'they have lost the sweetness of fame and group feeling, because they are dominated by force'. Ibn Khaldun also argued that *asabiyyah* goes down when the government takes over certain functions of caring, for instance welfare, which had previously been carried out voluntarily. What was once done out of *asabiyyah* is now taken by force.

Ibn Khaldun viewed world history as cyclical, seeing that every society, just like every dynasty, must eventually decline. The Arab historian also noted that, once people became used to luxury, 'group feeling and courage weaken. Members of the tribe revel in the wellbeing that God has given them... They have disdain also for all the other things that are necessary in connection with group feeling... Their group feeling and courage decrease in the next generations, eventually group feeling is altogether destroyed.'

It has become fashionable for the well educated to dismiss any idea of patriotism, a fashion that might have been recognizable to Ibn Khadlun. In most western nations the percentage of people saying they feel proud of their country has declined, but in Britain, in particular, a very large number of young adults feel little sense of pride but also duty to their country.[xli] There are a number of reasons for this; for one, cosmopolitanism and wider travel, and contact with people from different cultures, strips away at the nastier aspects of nationalism. But along with this goes the social glue, the sense of duty, the unspoken obligations to fellow citizens to prize them above others. Patriotism ultimately comes down to what Ibn Khaldun identified as the core of feeling binding a group together; when well-connected and comfortable members of the cultural elite sneer at less sophisticated patriots it has an impact on the *asabiyyah* of the society.

It is healthy for a society to be self-critical, to hold up a mirror to itself. Likewise within a group it is no bad thing to have a small number who question and reject the idea of loyalty altogether; a good society needs free thinkers, and among intellectuals there will always be those opposed to any sort of group attachment and sceptical of the mythology necessary to patriotism. But a population can only healthily accommodate a certain number of such social capital free riders; when a large proportion disdain patriotism because to do so signals high status, then it suggests a society deep within the *asabiyyah* cycle.

A key part of patriotism is a willingness to fight for one's country, something as many as three-quarters of Britons would refuse to do.[xlii] But as Lenn Evan Goodman wrote:[xliii] '*Asabiyyah*, whether in the nation or the tribe, becomes a matter of willingness to die. It is because this is so that nations and tribes, and the families, states or dynasties which rule them, have finite life spans. Unless individuals are prepared to die for their group, the group itself will die.'

Western society is not going to suddenly collapse because people proclaim themselves unwilling to die for their countries, b ut there are great benefits to a strong nation-state held together by *asabiyyah*. As the philosopher Rog er Scruton wrote: 'Democracy involves the ability to grant a share in government to people with whom you profoundly disagree, including people of another faith. This is possible only where government is secular, and where nevertheless people revere the process of government as the

expression of a shared national identity.

‘A society of citizens is a society in which strangers can trust one another, since everyone is bound by a common set of rules… it means that trust can grow between strangers, and does not depend upon family connections, tribal loyalties or favours granted and earned.’ For Scruton, the nation-state is the ‘society of strangers’, against the Bedouin idea of concentric circles of loyalty; without such a society of strangers arbitrary government crushes the rule of law and graft becomes the norm. Presidents Mubarak of Egypt and Ali of Tunisia were thieves on a massive scale and ruled over systems where corruption was widespread; in Tunisia the revolution started because a 26-year-old trader refused to pay the necessary ‘fine’ to a local official.

Nation-states and the bonds holding people together voluntarily – whether one calls it patriotism or nationalism or something else – are hugely beneficial, despite assumptions that they are going to make way for a post-national future. After their struggles against ISIS it seems likely that the Kurds will eventually achieve their long-held ambition of a state of their own; certainly they never got the memo about nation-states being a thing of the past.

In the introduction to his great work Ibn Khaldun listed seven mistakes regularly made by historians, among them ‘partisanship towards a creed or opinion’ and ‘a mistaken belief in the truth’, chastisement deserved by almost all political commentators today (this author included). The worst, however, was ‘ignorance of the laws governing the transformation of human society’, and that was what he set out to redress. This is a mistake still frequently made by people in positions of power, and for this reason his work remains hugely relevant today.

The successes and failures of human societies in the 21st century will remain dominated by *asabiyyah*, and without recognizing its importance we will continue to waste men and money in the pursuit of hopeless causes, and mistakenly see our world only in terms of economics, ideology or religion. We cannot ignore *asabiyyah*, for as Goodman wrote, ‘the laws of *asabiyyah* will be the laws of history’.

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# Footnotes

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[xxxi] Other estimates put the relative forces at up to 40,000 Iraqi army and 800 ISIS fighters. Either way, a huge ratio https://twitter.com/edwest/stat us/477476214631038976

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