



Ibn Khaldun and the Nation-State Law

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israeli Jewish leftists and Israel's Arab politicians have been the major detractors of the newly passed "Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People." Ibn Khaldun's concept of "*asabiyya*" (collective *esprit de corps*) must be marshalled to protect Israel from its enemies and to rein in Israel's unrealistic "liberals."

Numerous detractors have expressed criticism of the new basic law passed by the Knesset entitled "Israel: the Nation-State of the Jewish People." The most important of these detractors are leftist Jewish Israelis and the political parties that represent them (the Zionist Union and Meretz), as well as the Arab Joint List, and voices within the Druze community.

Ironically, it was the renowned 14th century Arab Muslim thinker and historian Ibn Khaldun who explained why a law defining the nation-ness of the state is necessary (as opposed to laws defining the principles and internal workings of the state, such as the principle of equality among citizens as individuals).

Ibn Khaldun is credited with adumbrating, in a 1,000 page work, the first grand theory of human history. He was a veteran politician in numerous courts of his day from Spain to Tunisia, where he was born, and was a schemer in most of them (or so claimed the numerous rulers who imprisoned or exiled him). His grand theory of politics is based on long historical cycles of rising and falling states and empires in accordance with the vicissitudes in their collective cohesion.

According to Ibn Khaldun, it is the spiritual bonding and togetherness he famously called *asabiyya* (best translated as a tribal *esprit de corps*) that allows groups and societies to evolve from humble beginnings into thriving and conquering states and empires. Yet as they make this transformation and grow accustomed to the refinements of richness and urban life, indulging in learning,

culture and the arts, and pure hedonism, they gradually lose their *asabiyya* and are subsequently conquered by new militant arrivals from the steppes and the desert. They in turn undergo the same “civilizing” process only to fall prey to new invading hordes. So common is this cyclic phenomenon that Ibn Khaldun termed it “*madaniyya*” – a derivative of the Arab word for city and the act of becoming urban.

Ibn Khaldun’s ideas, whether consciously or unconsciously, were hardly foreign to the philosophy of Zionism. From A.D. Gordon to the spiritual essays of HaRav Kook, from HaShomer to the Palmah, there was an awareness that the Jews in the Diaspora, while praised for their tenaciousness in keeping the faith, were losing their national compass. The pioneers who worked the land in frontier areas, the Jews who “conquered the mountains” where the nation’s forefathers once trod, enacted the *esprit de corps* and collective cohesion embodied in Ibn Khaldun’s *asabiyya*.

Israel is today one of the most urban societies in the world. Less than half of one percent of the population work on the land. Shopping malls tower over the water stacks that characterized the kibbutzim and moshavim. The original pioneering spirit and readiness for sacrifice on behalf of the national group have been largely replaced by a growing sense of individualism. There is a danger that *asabiyya* will give way to *madaniyya*, if this has not already transpired.

Israel cannot afford to take Ibn Khaldun lightly. It needs *asabiyya* to deal with its many foes, some of whom are Israeli Arab citizens when they act collectively, not as individuals.

In the first days of Arafat’s war of terror (euphemized as the “al-Aqsa Intifada”), Israel’s Arab media new sites reported that thousands of Israeli Arabs shouted, during their violent demonstrations, “*Khaibar, Khaibar, ya Yahud, jaysh Muhammad saya’ud*” (Khaibar, Khaibar, oh Jews, the army of Muhammad will return).

Khaibar was a battlefield on which, according to Muslim oral teaching, the prophet’s army annihilated a large Jewish tribe as an important stepping stone in his triumph over Mecca.

Israel’s Arab parties continue to show their own “*asabiyya*” in their never-ending efforts to de-legitimize the Jewish State in foreign fora in the name of democracy and human rights. These are many of the same parties who fawned obsequiously to despots like Assad the father, Saddam Hussein, and Muammar Qaddafi. No one should be fooled.

Yet Israeli “liberals” are increasingly willing to believe that Ibn Khaldun is old hat, and that nationalism of almost any sort is an irrelevant, 19th century phenomenon, unbecoming to a modern state in the 21st century. They make light of the persistent efforts of the Arab leadership within Israel to destroy Israel from within and the danger that Israel will be neither Jewish nor democratic if they get their way.

The Nation-State law is at a deep level an attempt to find the equilibrium point between civilization – the need to be fair and decent to non-Jewish citizens – and the need to reassert Israel’s collective national identity as both a Jewish State (as stipulated by the November 1947 UN partition resolution) and the state of the Jewish People. Israeli Jews must reassert their collective *esprit de corps* in the face of the hordes pining for Israel’s downfall as a Jewish and democratic state. The Nation-State law can accomplish both these ends.

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