

IBN KHALDŪN'S THEORY OF 'AŞABIYYAH AND THE CONCEPT OF MUSLIM UMMAH

By
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Abstract

Theory of 'Aşabiyyah as introduced by Ibn Khaldūn is concerning notion of sharing common descent and sense within particular group members. It is natural feelings of affection instilled in human beings, mainly in protecting their group members or brothers who are treated unjustly. Hence, it is depicted in line and not contrary to Islam based on this basis. However, within Islam, there is a concept of Muslim Ummah which based on faith and respect and notion of universal brotherhood, regardless ethnic or group background. Hence, how does the theory of 'Aşabiyyah fit into the concept of Muslim Ummah? Are there similarities or differences between these two concepts? Thus, this paper discusses further the comparison between Ibn Khaldūn theory of 'Aşabiyyah and the concept of Muslim Ummah, as well as examine the theory of 'Aşabiyyah from the Islamic perspective.

Keywords: 'Aşabiyyah, Muslim Ummah, Ibn Khaldūn, Brotherhood in Islam

Introduction

The theory 'Aşabiyyah from Ibn Khaldūn's perspective can be understood as a notion or feeling among the members of a group of the principle that they share a common descent, where the most powerful sentiment is that of sharing the same blood. This notion, commonly found among the Bedouin, allows the members of the group to feel superior to others.¹ The strong sense of 'Aşabiyyah possessed by the Bedouin allowed them to defeat urban or sedentary people who were settled in towns and they subsequently established their own dynasties. As time passed, their sense of 'Aşabiyyah loosened and wore thin once they had comfortably settled down to a sedentary life and eventually another group with stronger 'Aşabiyyah was able to defeat them in their turn and replace their dynasty with a new one.

This term 'Aşabiyyah is perceived as a negative type of conduct in Islam, because it signifies an act practised mainly by Arabs during a period of ignorance (*jahillyah*), which is contrary to the spirit of Islam and condemned by the Prophet.² Yet from Ibn Khaldūn's perspective it was meant to have a positive connotation in explaining his theory of 'Aşabiyyah and *Al-'Umrān*.

What is Ibn Khaldun's theory of 'Aşabiyyah?

Linguistically, the term 'Aşabiyyah is from the word, 'asab', which means 'to bind'.³ Baali explained it as "...to bind an individual into a group (*asabatun, usbatun, or isabatun*)."⁴ *The Encyclopedia of Islam* defines 'Aşabiyyah as originally meaning 'spirit of kinship' within the family or tribe, where "...the 'asaba are the male relations in the male line."⁵ Thus, *asabah* refers to the kinsfolk of a person on his father's side. These kinsfolk or relatives are known as 'asabah' for they toughen and protect the

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¹ Mahmoud Dhaouadi, 'Ibn Khaldūn: The Founding Father of Eastern Sociology', *International Sociology*, 5, (1990) see <http://iss.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/5/3/319> (accessed May 19, 2009), p 325

³ Fuad Baali, 'Aşabiyyah' in John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Volume I, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p 140

⁴ Fuad Baali, *Society, State and Urbanism: Ibn Khaldun's Sociological Thought*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, p 43.

⁵ F. Gabrieli, 'Aşabiyyah' in H.A.R. Gibb, J.H. Kramers, J. Schacht, et al. (eds) *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Volume I, A-B, Leiden : E.J.Brill, 1986, p 681

person and cause him or her to become stronger. To Simon, ‘*Aṣabiyyah*, according to Simon, refers to “...‘the nature of the group’ or ‘groupdom.’”⁶ Or in Baali’s words, ‘*Aṣabiyyah* signifies “...to a sociocultural bond that can be used to measure the strength of social groupings.”⁷

The Arabic-English Lexicon gives a long definition of this term. ‘*Aṣabiyyah* is defined as a quality or characteristic of a person who possesses ‘*asabiyyu*, which are the characteristics of a person in helping his fellows or people against hostility, or being angry and fanatical for the sake of his people or group and acting to defend them.⁸ It also refers to the action of a person who invites others to purposely help, join and associate with his group or people against those who are hostile to them whether they are being mistreated or are the offenders.⁹

Lisan al-Arab also gives a definition of ‘*Aṣabiyyah* similar to the above. ‘*Aṣabiyyah*, according to *Lisan al-Arab* means a request or invitation from a person to join him or her in helping his or her fellows, whether this group is the transgressor or is being mistreated.¹⁰ Referring to the Hadīth of The Prophet, *al-‘asabiyyu* means someone who helps his fellows not to right matters but to transgress or offend.¹¹ Such a person is angry for the sake of his fellows, protecting and defending one group, as mentioned in one of the Hadīth of The Prophet, “He is not of us who proclaims the cause of tribal partisanship; and he is not of us who fights in the cause of tribal partisanship; and he is not of us who dies in the cause of tribal partisanship.”¹²

‘*Aṣabiyyah*¹³ in general can be understood as “...man’s supporting his people, to whom he belongs, whether they are right or wrong, oppressing or oppressed. The belonging to these people can be due to kith and kin, ethnicity, color, birth place, citizenship, school of thought, or a group of people with a common interest.”¹⁴ In this sense, ‘*Aṣabiyyah* is linked to chauvinism, which means “a strong and unreasonable belief that your own country or group is better than others.”¹⁵ This kind of spirit arises due to one’s feeling of being superior to others, whereas people from other groups are thought to be of lower rank and not as worthy of respect.¹⁶ It can occur in different circumstances, whether in family relationships or matters of descent (which is believed to be the strongest form of ‘*Aṣabiyyah*), the region where the person or group lives or the group or school of thought to which a group or person belongs. In all these situations, the sense of ‘*Aṣabiyyah* implies that someone of their group is superior and looks down on others. Thus, this sense of ‘*Aṣabiyyah* is condemned by Islam.

The term ‘*Aṣabiyyah* in Ibn Khaldūn’s theory has appeared in many translations and interpretations by contemporary scholars. In sum, there is no accurate word in the English language for ‘*Aṣabiyyah* in Ibn Khaldūn’s sense. As stated by Arnason and Stauth, “This is one of his most untranslatable terms and Western interpreters have differed widely in their views on its meaning.”¹⁷ Scholars such as Baali, Simon and Dhaouadi are of the opinion that what Ibn Khaldūn meant by the term is hard to define and

⁶ Heinrich Simon, *Ibn Khaldun’s Science of Human Culture*, (trans) Fuad Baali, New Delhi: Adam Publishers and Distributors, 2002, p 47.

⁷ Fuad Baali, ‘*Aṣabiyyah*’ in John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Volume I, p 140

⁸ E.W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* Volume Two, Lebanon: Librairie Du Liban, 1968, p 2059.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Muhammad ibn Mukarram Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab* Mujallad 1, Bayrut, Lubnan: Dar al-Sadr, 1997, p 202

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ The definition of ‘*Aṣabiyyah* here does not refer to the theory of ‘*Aṣabiyyah* propounded by Ibn Khaldūn

¹⁴ ‘*Aṣabiyyah* as a disease’ see http://www.islamview.org/khutab_html/Tribalism%20part1_E.htm (accessed May 18, 2009)

¹⁵ Sara Hawker (ed), *Little Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p 108

¹⁶ For ‘*Aṣabiyyah* as a disease, see http://www.islamview.org/khutab_html/Tribalism%20part1_E.htm (accessed May 18, 2009)

¹⁷ Johann P. Arnason and George Stauth, ‘Civilization and State Formation in the Islamic Context: Re-Reading Ibn Khaldun’, *Thesis Eleven*, 76, (2004) see <http://the.sagepub.com.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/content/76/1/29.full.pdf+html> (accessed December 27, 2011), p 33

translate, mainly because he himself gave no clear definition of it. Perhaps the term was quite prevalent in his time and he saw no need define it.¹⁸

Hence, Simon, Baali and Rabī' advise using the term as it is in Arabic without translation, as this practice will preserve its meaning as used by Ibn Khaldūn. However, there are scholars who have attempted to translate the term by such phrases as 'group feeling', 'esprit de corps', 'social solidarity', 'group feeling' and 'group loyalty.'¹⁹ Baali lists the translations of this term in the following: "The term '*aṣabiyyah* has been translated as 'esprit de corps,' 'partisanship,' 'famille,' 'parti,' 'tribal consciousness,' 'blood relationship,' 'tribal spirit,' 'tribal loyalty,' 'vitality,' 'feeling of unity,' 'group adhesion,' 'groupdom,' 'sense of solidarity,' 'group mind', 'collective consciousness', 'group feeling', 'feeling of solidarity' and 'social solidarity'."²⁰ Thus, there are no exact or equivalent terms in English to translate it. Hence, contemporary scholars translate the term into English in various ways (as defined by Ibn Khaldūn), such as 'group spirit', 'esprit de corps', 'social solidarity', 'tribal partisanship', and so on.

In Ibn Khaldūn's explanation, '*Aṣabiyyah* is one of the crucial elements influencing the rise and fall of a group or community. This sense which is based on blood ties and on having or sharing similar interests, became a force for a group to stay together and fight other groups which threatened to weaken '*Aṣabiyyah*. Additional elements of the religious spirit, which in his view was able to free the group members from jealousy, make the group stronger. However, once the group reaches its peak and its members can live in comfort and luxury, the sense of '*Aṣabiyyah* weakens and brings the group to a decline. Though not all communities experience the same sequence, excessive luxury brings about their decline and then they are replaced by a new governing entity or group which possesses stronger '*Aṣabiyyah*.

'*Aṣabiyyah* Ibn Khaldun from the Islamic perspective

The term '*Aṣabiyyah* is mentioned both in the Qur'ān and the Hadīth of the Prophet. Apparently, Al-Qur'ān uses the terminology '*Aṣabiyyah* as '*usbah* to describe the great bond of a group, giving the general meaning of the term '*Aṣabiyyah*, whereas in the Hadīth, the Prophet clearly states the prohibition of Islam against Muslims who depend on '*Aṣabiyyah*.

In the Qur'ān, the term '*Aṣabiyyah*, expressed as "*uṣbah*" can be found in four different places, namely, in *sūrah* An-Nūr: 24: 11, *sūrah* Al-Qaṣaṣ: 28: 26 and *sūrah* Yūsuf: 12: 8 and 14, as follows:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ جَاءُوا بِالْإِفْكِ عُصْبَةٌ مِّنْكُمْ لَا تَحْسَبُوهُ شَرًّا لَّكُم بَلْ هُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ لِكُلِّ امْرِئٍ مِّنْهُمْ مَا أَكْتَسَبَ مِنَ الْإِثْمِ وَالَّذِي تَوَلَّى كِبْرَهُ مِنْهُمْ لَهُ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ

Those who brought forward the lie are **a body** among yourselves: think it not to be an evil to you: on the contrary it is good for you: to every man among them (will come the punishment) of the sin that he earned and to him who took on himself the lead among them will be a Penalty grievous.²¹

إِنَّ قُرُونَ كَانَتْ مِنْ قَوْمِ مُوسَىٰ فَبَعَثْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ ظُفُرًا فَانكَبُوا عَلَىٰ أَعْقَابِهِمْ مِنَ الظُّنُورِ وَمَا أُنذِرُوا إِلَّا بِالْعَصْبِ أُولَىٰ الْقُوَّةِ إِذْ قَالَ لَهُ قَوْمُهُ لَا تَفْرَحْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْفَرِحِينَ

¹⁸ Fuad Baali, *Society, State and Urbanism : Ibn Khaldun's Sociological Thought*, p 43

¹⁹ Muhammad Mahmoud Rabī'. *The Political Theory of Ibn Khaldūn*, p 49 and Mahmoud Dhaouadi, 'Ibn Khaldūn: The Founding Father of Eastern Sociology', *International Sociology*, 5, 1990, <http://iss.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/5/3/319> (accessed May 19, 2009), p 325

²⁰ Fuad Baali, *Society, State and Urbanism : Ibn Khaldun's Sociological Thought*, pp 43-44.

²¹ *Al-Qur'ān*, 23: 11

Qarūn was doubtless, of the people of Moses; but he acted insolently towards them: such were the treasures We had bestowed on him, that their very keys would have been a burden to **a body** of strong men: behold, his people said to him: "Exult not, for Allah loveth not those who exult (in riches)."²²

إِذْ قَالُوا لْيُوسُفُ وَأَخُوهُ أَحَبُّ إِلَيْنَا مِنَّا وَنَحْنُ عُصْبَةٌ إِنَّ أَبَانَا لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ

They said: "Truly Joseph and his brother are loved more by our father than we: but we are a **goodly body**! Really our father is obviously in error."²³

قَالُوا لَئِن آكَلَهُ الذَّئْبُ وَنَحْنُ عُصْبَةٌ إِنَّا إِذَا لَخَسِرُونَ

They said: "If the wolf were to devour him while we are **(so large) a party**, then should we indeed (first) have perished ourselves!"²⁴

In verse 11 of *sūrah* An-Nūr, the term ‘*uṣbah*’ describes a group of slanderers, not one or two²⁵ but probably from ten to forty people,²⁶ who had created a rumour about the wife of the Prophet, A‘ishah, and spread it to the other Muslims in Madinah. They were ‘Abdullah bin Ubbay bin Salul, Zayd bin Rifa‘ah, Mistah ibn Uthatah, Hassan ibn Thabit and Hamnah bint Jahsh.²⁷ Hence, the term in the verse shows that there were many of them, forming a strong group.

Meanwhile in *sūrah* Al-Qaṣaṣ, verse 76, the ‘*uṣbah*’ in this *sūrah* signifies a group of strong men who were required to carry the keys of Qarūn’s treasuries as there were many of them.²⁸ Qarūn’s treasuries were so great that the keys had to be carried on sixty mules. Each key was for a different storeroom, made from leather and resembling a finger.²⁹

The term ‘*uṣbah*’ found in verses 8 and 11 of *sūrah* Yūsuf indicates the strong character of Yūsuf’s stepbrothers. Because they were many, strong and grown-up, they believed that they deserved more attention and affection from Ya‘qūb than Yūsuf and his brother, which were still small and weak. At the same time, society in this era relied heavily on numbers of independent tribes which mainly consisted of their ancestors and progeny, including sons, grandsons, brothers and nephews. Hence, they were vital persons in preserving the security of their family. Therefore, Yūsuf’s stepbrothers believed their father was senile because he loved Yūsuf and his brother more than he loved them.

Hence, the condemnation of ‘*Aṣabiyyah*’ in Islam is not obviously stated in the Qur‘ān. However, it is clearly uttered by the Prophet in the following Hadīth:

ليس منا من دعا إلى عصبية وليس منا من قاتل على عصبية وليس
منا من مات على عصبية

²² *Al-Qur‘ān*, 28: 76

²³ *Al-Qur‘ān*, 12: 8

²⁴ *Al-Qur‘ān*, 12:14

²⁵ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir (abridged)*, Volume 7 (Surah An-Nur to Surah Al-Ahzab, verse 50), (abridged by Sheikh Safiur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers and Distributors, 2000, p 33

²⁶ Abdullah bin Ahmad bin Muhammad An-Nasafi, *Tafsir an-Nasafi (Mudrak al-Tanzil wa Haqa‘iq al-Ta‘wil)*, Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir, 1998, p 491.

²⁷ Sayyid Abul Ala’ Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding the Qur‘ān*, Volume VI (Surah 22-24) (trans Zafar Ishaq Ansari), Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1998, p 207.

²⁸ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir (abridged)*, Volume 7 (surah An-Nūr to surah Al-Ahzab, verse 50), (abridged by Sheikh Safiur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, p 442

²⁹ Ibid

He is not of us (he) who proclaims the cause of tribal partisanship; and he is not of us (he) who fights in the cause of tribal partisanship; and he is not of us (he) who dies in the cause of tribal partisanship.³⁰

The Prophet was then asked by one of his companions to explain the meaning of tribal partisanship (*'Aṣabiyyah*) and he replied,

أن تعين قومك على الظلم

“[It means] your helping your own people in an unjust cause.”³¹

This Hadīth shows that *'Aṣabiyyah* was understood by the Prophet as helping one's people in an unjust cause or action.³² According to Ibn Khaldūn in Rabī's explanation, this kind of *'Aṣabiyyah* or *'Aṣabiyyah* of Jahilliyah (the pre-Islamic period) is "...an abhorred feeling and a condemned way of behavior."³³ He further explains, "It had its origin in the feeling of pride and vanity and the desire to belong to a powerful or noble tribe. These crude feelings and the evils they led to, were censured as being pagan in spirit and action."³⁴ Hence, *'Aṣabiyyah* in this respect can be understood as chauvinism, being biased or giving blind support to the members of one's group for acting transgressively, with prejudice or for unjust reasons.

However, according to the Hadīth of the Prophet above, as Asad explains, the "...love of one's own people as such cannot be described as 'tribal partisanship' unless it leads to doing wrong to other groups."³⁵ Moreover, Muslims are urged to love their brother as they love themselves and to help them whether they are being wronged or doing wrong.³⁶ Likewise, Al-Nawawi stated that it is not perceived as *'Aṣabiyyah* condemned by Islam if a person loves his people and his group or family. **Thus, his testimony will be accepted in the court if he becomes a witness to his people and friends and it is not rejected.**³⁷ In this respect, Islam forbids Muslims being biased, to do wrong or to help his own people on the basis of evil, transgression. Muslims are discouraged from uniting solely on the basis of race, complexion or physical attributes. On the other hand, Islam does not oppose its followers if they want to help other people, including members of their own group or from a similar background in virtue and goodness, or equally to help their universal brothers including non-Muslims.³⁸

What is the concept of Muslim *Ummah*?

In Islam, there is a wider concept of relationship among Muslim than a bond built on a blood relationship or a similar background and ancestry. This concept of brotherhood, a relationship between

³⁰ Abu Da'ūd, on the authority of Jubayr ibn Mut'im, cited in Muhammad Asad, *The Principles of State and Government in Islam*, Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1961, p 32

³¹ On the authority of Wathilah ibn al-Asqa', cited in Muhammad Asad, *The Principles of State and Government in Islam*, p 32

³² Yves Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldūn: The Birth of History and The Past of the Third World*, London: Verso Editions, 1984, p 103.

³³ Muhammad Mahmoud Rabī. *The Political Theory of Ibn Khaldūn*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967, p 67

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Muhammad Asad, *The Principles of State and Government in Islam*, Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1961, p 32.

³⁶ This is based on the saying of the Prophet which means, "The Faithful are to one another like [parts of] a building, each part strengthening the others." And "The Apostle of God said: 'Help your brother, be he a wrongdoer or wronged.' Thereupon a man exclaimed: 'O Apostle of God! I may help him if he is wronged; but how could I [be expected to] help a wrongdoer?' The Prophet answered: 'You must prevent him from doing wrong: that will be your help to him.'" (Al-Bukhari and Muslim, on the authority of Anas, cited in Muhammad Asad, *The Principles of State and Government in Islam*, pp 31 and 33

³⁷ Zaid Ahmad, 'Ibn Khaldūn's Approach in Civilisational Studies' in Massimo Campanini (ed), *Studies on Ibn Khaldūn*, Polimetrica: International Scientific Publisher, 2005, p 115.

³⁸ Refer to *Al-Qur'ān*, 5:2.

Muslims is founded on the basis of faith and respect.³⁹ It is a rapport "...between the Muslims [which] transcends all racial and tribal barriers and it is upheld by their common faith in Allah (swt), making it stronger than any other type of relationship, even blood relationships."⁴⁰ As mentioned in the Qur'anic verse,

إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِخْوَةٌ فَأَصْلِحُوا بَيْنَ أَخَوَيْكُمْ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ

The Believers are but a single Brotherhood: So make peace and reconciliation between your two (contending) brothers: And fear Allah that ye may receive Mercy.⁴¹

Further, we read:

وَأَعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءً فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ بِنِعْمَتِهِ إِخْوَانًا وَكُنْتُمْ عَلَىٰ شَفَا حُفْرَةٍ مِّنَ النَّارِ فَأَنْقَذَكُم مِّنْهَا كَذَٰلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ آيَاتِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ

And hold fast, all together by the rope which Allah (stretches out for you) and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude Allah's favour on you; for ye were enemies and He joined your hearts in love so that by His Grace, ye became brethren; and ye were on the brink of the pit of fire and He saved you from it. Thus doth Allah make his signs clear to you: that ye may be guided.⁴²

Based on this concept, all Muslims belong to the same religion, are committed to obeying the same ultimate reality and no one is superior to any other except those who are pious and closer to God. They are encouraged to help others on the basis of goodness and piety and to fight those who are against the religion, notwithstanding the complexion of their skin, their language, ethnic background or tribe. As stated in the Qur'an,

وَإِذَا حَلَلْتُمْ فَاصْطَادُوا وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَاٰنُ قَوْمٍ أَن صَدُّوكُمْ عَنِ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ أَن تَعْتَدُوا وَتَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْبِرِّ وَالتَّقْوَىٰ وَلَا تَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ

But when ye are clear of the Sacred Precincts and of pilgrim garb, ye may hunt and let not the hatred of some people in (once) shutting you out of the Sacred Mosque lead you to transgression (and hostility on your part). Help ye one another in righteousness and piety, but help ye not one another in sin and rancour: fear Allah: for Allah is strict in punishment.⁴³

The concept of brotherhood in Islam not only requires Muslims to help their brothers, but to love them exactly as they love themselves. Hence, it is seen as the highest level of love (which is based on faith), when due to this love, we want someone else to have the same good things that we have.⁴⁴ The Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) said: "You will not enter paradise until you believe and you will not

³⁹ Siddiq Buckley, 'The Concept of Brotherhood in Islam', Dec 23, 2010, see <http://islamweb.us/the-concept-of-brotherhood-in-islam.html> (accessed January 11, 2012)

⁴⁰ 'The Bonds of Brotherhood', *Al-Islami.com*, see <http://al-islami.com/islam/unity/brotherhood.php> (accessed January 11, 2012)

⁴¹ *Al-Qur'an*, 49: 10

⁴² *Al-Qur'an*, 3:103

⁴³ *Al-Qur'an*, 5: 2

⁴⁴ 'The Bonds of Brotherhood', *Al-Islami.com*, see <http://al-islami.com/islam/unity/brotherhood.php> (accessed January 11, 2012)

believe until you love one another."⁴⁵ He also said, "You will not be a believer until you love for your brother what you love for yourself."⁴⁶

According to Jaffary, the concepts of brotherhood and equality are the basis of the concept of *Ummah* in Islam. In Jaffary's words, "The *umma* in Islam promotes the concept of brotherhood, which is very important and a fundamental teaching. Everybody will be treated equally before God, regardless of their race, colour, or physical attributes. But the important character to be determined by God is *taqwa*, 'God consciousness.'"⁴⁷ As mentioned in one of the Qur'anic verses;

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ
إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).⁴⁸

It is also mentioned in one of the sayings of the Prophet (PBUH),

"Indeed there is no excellence for an Arab over a non-Arab, nor a non-Arab over an Arab, nor a white person over a black one, nor a black person over a white one, except through *taqwa* (piety and obedience to Allah)."⁴⁹

The concept of *Ummah* introduced during the time of the Prophet replaced the concept of tribal loyalty which existed among the Arabs during the period of ignorance (*Jahilliyyah*). It became the distinguishing mark of an individual's identity in society, superior to the tribal loyalty that they used to enjoy before. Once a person has embraced Islam, his or her life is no longer dominated by the influence of his or her tribe and race. His or her life is now fully established on the basis of the oneness of Allah and the prophethood of Muhammad. Ahsan has described this in detail (below),

"An individual, after accepting Islam, would no longer be expected to sacrifice his life and his belongings to the honour, dignity and security of his tribe; he was no longer ruled by tribal law and customs. Instead, his life is now dominated by the idea of the unity of Allah and the prophethood of Muhammad. He now had a new set of values and laws by which to conduct his life; Muslims were now called upon to live beyond a predetermined tribal identity. In fact, the newly-established *Ummah* stood on its own merit and gained recognition throughout the Madinan area."⁵⁰

Interestingly, Islam does not ignore differences in race, language or region as such, but regards every Muslim as a member of the same family. Ahsan affirms this, thus: "...the *Ummah* did not abolish tribal identity; it only changed the hierarchy of an individual's identities in society. In essence, the

⁴⁵ Sahih Muslim, cited in 'The Bonds of Brotherhood', Al-Islami.com, see <http://al-islami.com/islam/unity/brotherhood.php> (accessed January 11, 2012)

⁴⁶ Sahih Al-Bukhari, cited in 'The Bonds of Brotherhood', Al-Islami.com, see <http://al-islami.com/islam/unity/brotherhood.php> (accessed January 11, 2012)

⁴⁷ Awang, Jaffary, *The Notion of Ummah in Islam: The Response of Malay Muslim Intellectuals in Malaysia*, A Thesis Submitted to the University of Birmingham, for the Degree of PhD, Birmingham, UK, March 2000, p 63

⁴⁸ *Al-Qur'an*, 49: 13

⁴⁹ Sahih, related by Ahmad (5/411) and it was authenticated by Ibn Taymiyyah in *Kitaabul-Iqtidaa* (p.69).], cited in Abdul 'Azeez Baaz, 'Evils of Nationalism'

⁵⁰ Abdullah al-Ahsan, *Ummah or Nation? Identity Crisis in Contemporary Muslim Society*, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1992, p 3.

tribal identity of the individual was of secondary importance to an *Ummah* identity.”⁵¹ In addition, Watt notes that, “...the Islamic community has a strong sense of brotherhood and in this respect continues the solidarity of the Arabian tribe.”⁵² This accords to the Qur’ānic verse, *sūrah* 49, verse 13, cited above.

According to Ibn Kathir, this verse explains that Allah has created humankind from a single person, Adam, and from him He has created his mate, Hawwa. From their offspring, He created nations consisting of tribes. According to Ibn Kathir’s explanation, nations are referred to as non-Arab while tribes are referred to as Arabs.⁵³ Hence, all humankind share the same honour and are “...equal in their humanity...”⁵⁴ There is no preference between people in Islam except those who have taqwa. In Ibn Kathir’s view, the term ‘taqwa’ in this verse is contrasted with inherited rank: “...you earn honour with Allah the Exalted on account of Taqwa, not family lineage...”⁵⁵

Ibn Khaldun’s theory of ‘*Aṣabiyyah* within the concept *Muslim Ummah*

Ibn Khaldūn’s theory of ‘*Aṣabiyyah*’ concerns social or group solidarity. It is a natural feeling or disposition among human beings, aimed particularly at helping and protecting group members when they are treated unjustly. This feeling, brought to strengthen a group, subsequently became in the eyes of Ibn Khaldūn a crucial factor in the growth of society and the formation of a strong and sturdy political system.⁵⁶

Thus, although the sense of ‘*Aṣabiyyah*’ has negative connotations, such as chauvinism, haughtiness and arrogance and a hint of injustice, which is strongly condemned in Islam,⁵⁷ it also can be used for positive and beneficial purposes⁵⁸ and for one outstanding group. This is what is called a ‘controlled ‘*Aṣabiyyah*’, exercised for the sake of religion or to obey a divine order and in the interests of the truth.⁵⁹

However, the ‘positive’ nature of ‘*Aṣabiyyah*’ to its meaning, seems does not signify that it is similar with the Islamic concept of brotherhood and *Ummah*. Since its original sense was associated with particular groups, tribes and clans, it is unlike the concept of brotherhood and *Ummah*, which is based on justice, faith and transcends cultures, races, geography, languages and all sort of physical differences.⁶⁰ Therefore, contemporary scholars cannot agree on this issue. Professor Mohd Kamal Hassan, for example, argues that the sense of ‘*Aṣabiyyah*’ as meant by Ibn Khaldūn could be the same sense of ‘*Aṣabiyyah*’ that was condemned by the Prophet when ‘*Aṣabiyyah*’ reaches the point of being preserved for the sake of power and to protecting the dynasties and not for the sake of Islam, as has

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² W. M. Watt, *Islamic Political Thought*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968, p 97.

⁵³ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, see <http://tafsir.com/default.asp?sid=49&tid=49918>, (accessed August 31, 2010).

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Fuad Baali, *Society, State and Urbanism: Ibn Khaldūn’s Sociological Thought*, p 43 and Zaid Ahmad, ‘Ibn Khaldūn’s Approach in Civilizational Studies’, p 114.

⁵⁷ Ali Çaksu, ‘Ideals and Realities: Ibn Khaldun’s Justification of *Asabiyya* and Political Power’, pp 108-109, M. Umer Chapra, ‘Socioeconomic and Political Dynamic in Ibn Khaldūn’s Thought’, *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 16, No.4, (Winter 1999), see http://i-epistemology.net/attachments/641_V16N4%20Winter%2099%20-%20Chapra%20-%20Socioeconomic%20and%20Political%20Dynamics%20in%20Ibn%20Khalduns%20Thought.pdf (accessed December 11, 2009), p 4 and Zaid Ahmad, ‘Ibn Khaldun’s Approach in Civilizational Studies’, p 114.

⁵⁸ In this respect, Chapra acknowledges that linguistically there are two meanings of the term ‘*Aṣabiyyah*’. One is in line with the Islamic concept of brotherhood, whereas the other is described as “...blind prejudiced loyalty to one’s own group” (Chapra, 1999:4). For details, see Umer Chapra, M. Umer Chapra, ‘Socioeconomic and Political Dynamic in Ibn Khaldūn’s Thought’, *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, p 4.

⁵⁹ Ali Çaksu, ‘Ideals and Realities: Ibn Khaldun’s Justification of *Asabiyya* and Political Power’, p 108-109

⁶⁰ Professor Mohd Kamal Hassan, interviewed at the International Islamic University, Malaysia (IIUM), Gombak, Selangor on August 5, 2009

occurred in the history of Arab dynasties.⁶¹ Professor Abdullahil Ahsan takes a similar view, doubting the relationship between these two concepts, on the grounds that the concept of brotherhood in Islam is based on equality, which is not found within the sense of *'Aşabiyyah*.⁶²

On the contrary, the sense in which Ibn Khaldūn meant *'Aşabiyyah* is complementary to the Islamic concept of brotherhood and *Ummah*. The reason is that Islam recognizes and does not reject the actual situation of a community, which is mostly associated with and tending to racial affiliation and the influence of the major group, race or tribe.⁶³ Thus, it is a natural process for individuals or groups to follow their own preference or special instinct in associating or affiliating with their group members.⁶⁴ Because the sense of *'Aşabiyyah* is a natural sense for human beings, it is not for Islam to eradicate it but for Muslims to exercise it well. Thus, this whole 'picture' of arguments, *'Aşabiyyah* and the Islamic concept of brotherhood and *Ummah* could be described as 'the *'Aşabiyyah* of the *Ummah*

Meanwhile, according to Rabī', to see whether the theory of *'Aşabiyyah* is complementary to or conflicting with the Islamic point of view, it should be judged on the principle of its purposes or goal.⁶⁵ *'Aşabiyyah* refers to "...the affection a man feels for a brother or neighbour when one of them is treated unjustly or killed,"⁶⁶ intended for religious purposes or is "...carried out in compliance with a religious or a justified secular aim..."⁶⁷ It is not forbidden in Islam, but desirable and acceptable. This sense of *'Aşabiyyah*, is offered as a constructive, thought it is positive and instils moral concept.⁶⁸ However, *'Aşabiyyah* referring to "...the blind and prejudiced loyalty to one's own group...[leading] to the favouring of one's own group, irrespective of whether it is right or wrong and promotes inequities, mutual hatred and conflict,"⁶⁹ is in opposition to the teaching of the Islam and is banned by the Prophet Hence, it is agreed by most scholars of Ibn Khaldūn that he uses the term in the first sense. Therefore, it can be concluded that the theory of *'Aşabiyyah* perceived by Ibn Khaldūn is positive in intent and accords with the Islamic point of view. In other words, the theory of *'Aşabiyyah* is mutually complementary and not opposed to Islamic principles, i.e., the concept of *Ummah* and brotherhood in Islam.

In this respect, the sense of *'Aşabiyyah* as meant by Ibn Khaldūn could be seen as an 'inner' or internal sense or feeling which forms spontaneously formed within a person, whereas the concept of Islamic brotherhood and *Ummah* is imposed from outside.⁷⁰ Therefore, the concept of *Ummah* and Islamic brotherhood can be established through *'Aşabiyyah*, for the betterment of a community. Dr. Zaid Ahmad explains in an article the sense of *'Aşabiyyah* as something natural in the light of Islam,

“...Contrary to the one practiced in the pre-Islamic Arabia, *'asabiyya* as a natural disposition in man – the inner spirit of cohesiveness and solidarity – is not only compatible with Islamic

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Professor Abdullahil Ahsan, interviewed at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Gombak, Selangor on August 7, 2009

⁶³ Dr. Yusri Mohamad, interviewed for PhD at the International Islamic University, Malaysia (IIUM), Gombak, Selangor on August 4, 2009.

⁶⁴ Associate Professor Dr. Muhammad Nur Manutty, interviewed at Selangor International Islamic University College or Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS), Kajang, Selangor on August 28, 2009.

⁶⁵ Rabī', p 68

⁶⁶ Ibn Khaldūn. *The Muqaddimah*. (trans) Franz Rosenthal. *An Introduction to History*, Volume 1, New York: Princeton University Press, 1958, p lxxix

⁶⁷ Muhammad Mahmoud Rabī'. *The Political Theory of Ibn Khaldūn*, p 68

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ M. Umer Chapra, 'Socioeconomic and Political Dynamic in Ibn Khaldūn's Thought', *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 16, No.4, Winter 1999, see http://i-epistemology.net/attachments/641_V16N4%20Winter%201999%20-%20Chapra%20-%20Socioeconomic%20and%20Political%20Dynamics%20in%20Ibn%20Khalduns%20Thought.pdf (accessed December 11, 2009), p 4

⁷⁰ Associate Professor Dr. Zaid Ahmad, interviewed at the University of Putra Malaysia (UPM), Bangi, Selangor on August 23, 2009.

teaching but something that has to be instilled and practiced by members of the society. Without willingness to subordinate oneself to the group, peace and social development are not possible.”⁷¹

Apparently, this is how *‘Aṣabiyyah* worked in the early period of Islam where Muhammad (PBUH), from a noble and respected family, was sent as a Prophet and acknowledged his *‘nasab*. In other words, Syed Farid Alatas affirms that ‘...Allah does [acts] in a way that inclines with the social circumstances, with the culture...’⁷² Thus, there is a hadith of the Prophet which states that the leaders of the nation should be selected from the Quraisy.⁷³ In this respect, the hadith recognize the greatness and strength of the Quraisy as leaders, yet the hadith does not mean that the preference goes blindly to this tribe. It refers to the situation at the time of the Prophet where the Quraisy were the best and greatest of all the Arab tribes in producing leaders.⁷⁴ It could also apply to other circumstances in which a core group or race could lead the community, as long as they were strong, great and had a strong sense of *‘Asabiyyah* compared to other groups around them and their leadership was based on justice and truth, and exercised for the sake of religion (Islam).⁷⁵

Conclusion

In sum, there are different views among scholars regarding Ibn Khaldūn’s theory of *‘Aṣabiyyah* with a comparison of the concepts of Muslim *Ummah* and Islamic brotherhood. As a whole, it may be said that despite the different basis for the concepts of *‘Aṣabiyyah* and Islamic brotherhood and *Ummah*, these concepts are complementary. The sense of *‘Aṣabiyyah* or tribal affiliation is a natural sense in human beings, which one cannot eradicate. Yet the foremost criterion in distinguishing condemned *‘Aṣabiyyah* from approved *‘Aṣabiyyah* in Islam is based on its purpose, judging whether it is invoked solely for the sake of a group or tribe as they uphold and helping each other against justice, or for the sake of Islam, when truth, justice and mutual help are used purposely to aid one’s fellow-man in divinity, goodness and righteousness.

⁷¹ Zaid Ahmad, ‘Ibn Khaldūn’s Approach in Civilizational Studies’, Massimo Campanini (ed.), *Studies on Ibn Khaldūn*, (Polimetrica: International Scientific Publisher, 2005, p 114

⁷² Associate Professor Syed Farid Alatas, interviewed for the research at National University of Singapore, Singapore on September 7, 2009.

⁷³ A hadith of the Prophet, “الائمة من قريش”, which means, “The Imam (must) from the Quraysh. ”, (Reported by Ahmad and al Baihaqi).

⁷⁴ Dr. Yusri Mohamad, interviewed at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Gombak, Selangor on August 4, 2009.

⁷⁵ Ustaz (Dr) Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammady, interviewed at International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Kuala Lumpur on October 6, 2009.

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