

GRADUATE STUDENT FORUM

ANALYSIS OF IBN KHALDUN AND TOYNBEE'S APPROACHES TO HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I will discuss Arnold Toynbee's and Ibn Khaldun's conception of history. Both scholars left important works for world history and developed two different and original methodologies concerning history. They used specific methods in their work and inspired later historians. I provide first their definitions of history and then address both of their criticisms of historians and explain what methods they developed for studying history. I will try also to explain how both historians explain the cyclical understanding of history in the context of civilizations. Finally, the study will end with the conclusion that compares the historical approaches of both scholars.

Keywords: Toynbee, Ibn Khaldun, philosophy of history, 'umran, asabiyyah

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Toynbee¹ is a philosopher who was interested in the history of civilizations and worked especially on Greek and Eastern civilizations. Toynbee made analyzes on twenty-six civilizations in his book *The Study of History*, which he wrote on the history of civilization. Toynbee intends to attempt a historiography while studying civilizations. His view of history, his method and the criteria he deals with are very important for the science of history. For this reason, at the beginning of my work, I will examine how he defines history and how he considers the value and importance of historical science.

When describing history, Toynbee refers to man's attempt to control the future. Accordingly, human beings tend to make predictions and make decisions about their future as a feature that distinguishes them from other beings. This tendency leads people to benefit from their experiences. Because people can make better decisions or make predictions thanks to their experiences. In this context, Toynbee defines history as a collective experience of the entire human race. The individual experience of each person in his own life is also a real history.² On the other hand, it is not possible to know a person by looking at the present moment. To understand it, it is necessary to evaluate it together with its past. Toynbee states that in order to understand the present of civilizations, just like humans, we need to evaluate it together with their past.³ Understanding people and groups of people is important to understand how they will react and behave in the face of events. For example, the motion of some inanimate objects—stars, for example—can be detected in mathematical calculations. However, human behavior cannot be predicted because humans have willpower, and its behavior cannot be predicted in advance.⁴ According to Toynbee, what is more vital for a human being is to be able

to make predictions about his relationship with another being of his own kind, human. This is where the science of history can help us predict human behavior.

Toynbee is a historian who has experienced the effects of the period in which he lived and is concerned about the future by looking at these experiences. We can see the traces of these experiences and concerns from his historical description to his methodology of history. First of all, Toynbee is a historian who witnessed two world wars. He has seen the destruction caused by these wars, and has experienced many political and social breaks by taking part in political activities. The most important of his concerns for the future is that the fate of the human race in the atomic age is unknown. He fears the total extinction of the human race.⁵ The fact that people from different social structures live very close to each other in the atomic age pushes him to produce solutions against possible acts of violence.

The first clue to Toynbee's approach to history can be found in the question he asked at the beginning of *The Study of History*. He asks the question in relation to his attempt to write the history of England: "Can we abstract an internal history of England from her external relations?"⁶ With this question, he questions whether national histories can be written considering only their own internal dynamics. Toynbee considers this question as an opportunity to criticize historians who actually study history in fragments and to reveal his own method. According to him, the work of historians in general in the 19th century has been divisive. Historians of that time studied history in national divisions, and Toynbee speaks of its negative effects on politics. According to him, nationalist historians divided the Austrian Empire in this way.⁷

Toynbee presents his own approach after criticizing the fragmented analysis of history. According to him, in order to understand the parts, we must first focus our attention on the whole, because this whole is the field of study that is intelligible in itself. At this point we encounter another question. What are these "wholes" that make up understandable fields of study?⁸ In this regard, the example that Toynbee gives will be eye-opening. To explain the Industrial Revolution in England, for example, we would have to take into account the economic conditions not only in Western Europe, but also in Tropical Africa, America, Russia, India and the Far East.⁹ So we understand that English history is a story that "was the history

1 Toynbee was born in London in 1889. He studied Greek and Latin classics at Balliol College, Oxford. In 1912 he became a researcher and student counselor at Balliol. He served as the founding professor of Byzantine and modern Greek language, literature and history at the Korais Chair, which was opened at King's College London, affiliated to the University of London (1919-1924). He was a professor of international history at the same university (1925-1955), and continued to lecture after his retirement. Between 1925 and 1955, he served as research director at the Royal Institute of International Affairs / Chatam House in London. In that time, he published the first ten volumes of his main twelve-volume work, *A Study of History*. He received honorary doctorates from Oxford, Cambridge, Birmingham, Birmingham (Alabama), Princeton, New Jersey, Columbia and New York universities, and was elected a member of the French Institute. He was a lecturer at the British Academy in 1937. He died on October 22, 1975. Toynbee wrote this 10-volume work between 1934 and 1953. The first six volumes of this work, in which civilizations come and go one after another, were published in 1947. For more information on his life and work see William H. McNeill, *Arnold J. Toynbee: A Life* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

2 Arnold J. Toynbee, "Tarihin Faydası ve Değeri," *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi*, 1963, 94.

3 Ibid, 101.

4 Ibid, 95.

5 Ibid, 100.

6 Arnold J Toynbee, *A Study of History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 15.

7 Toynbee, "Tarihin Faydası ve Değeri," 101.

8 Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 74.

9 Ibid, 20.

of some society of which Great Britain was only a part, and the experiences were experiences in which other nations besides Great Britain were participants."¹⁰ It is understood from his determination that it is necessary to study history with a comparative method. In that case, when evaluating more than one event that occurred in the same processes in the course of history, the relations between them should not be neglected. Beyond the internal dynamics of these examples, the interactions, similarities and differences between them should be explored.

For him, the continuity of history, is not a continuity such as is exemplified in the life of a single individual. It is rather a continuity made up of the lives of successive generations. As an example to this, Western Society being related to the Hellenic Society in a manner with the relationship of a child to its parent.¹¹ For this reason, when writing history, it is necessary to focus not only on what exists today and what is defined by borders, but also on what is interactive and long-term with its contemporaries. In this context, Toynbee combined religious, geographical and partly political qualities and placed civilization at the center of historical study. Because, according to him, historical researchers should focus on writing the history of societies, not the history of the nation-state. He characterizes civilization as a type of society.¹²

I have already mentioned Toynbee's critique of nationalist historians. Their partial analysis of history and their writing history in favor of their own nation strengthens national consciousness. This shows that history is a science that has an impact on the political arena. However, as I mentioned earlier, Toynbee is concerned about the negative consequences of the nationalist approach. On the other hand, taking the side of his own nation prevents the historian from being objective. However, according to him, the historian should seek the truth. It should not use the science of history for practical benefits.

Toynbee is a responsible thinker, albeit in the name of his country and civilization. It is the purpose of making predictions about the future, eliminating concerns, producing suggestions and solutions, which prompted him to study history. For this, it is necessary to know the people and the civilizations they belong to. For this reason, it is necessary to research the histories of people and civilizations. Saying that societies now live very close to each other and have very different qualities, Toynbee states that a holistic understanding of history is important for societies to live together and in peace.¹³ He sees Augustine and ibn Khaldun as

unifying historians.¹⁴

Toynbee considers historical studies to be a part of man's search for meaning because man wants the same certainty about everything in the universe. This is the reason for the questions one always asks. It is a kind of human search for meaning. However, historical information is not as precise and definite as the mathematical information we know about the inanimate world. The utility of history is similar to the utility of philosophy and theology. It has less depth than them, but with this depth, a greater precision is achieved.¹⁵

Many scholars consider Toynbee a religious historian. Because he saw history and the whole historical process from a "theological point of view". While studying civilizations, he did not neglect religions and referred to the similarity of Christianity and Islam's approach to history. Because in both, history begins with the first human and continues until the judgement day.¹⁶

Toynbee has a cyclical understanding of history. He explains this cycle in the context of civilizations. In the context of civilizations, he explains this cycle with the terms "challenge" and "response". According to this, civilizations throughout history can continue to exist as long as there is an appropriate "response" in all kinds of difficulties (challenge situation) they face. So the growth of civilizations depends on appropriate answers to the challenge. Creative minorities in society are of great importance in the implementation of these appropriate responses. The growth of civilizations depends on their actions. Civilization will not progress if they cannot maintain the devotion of their followers to them.¹⁷ Because societies imitate these creative minorities. Toynbee expresses this situation with the concept of "mimesis". As a result, if the creative power of the leaders weakens and the loyalty of the majority to the leader decreases, social cohesion is broken, the unity of that civilization weakens and disintegration becomes inevitable. Societies cannot determine their own destiny and this is the most important symptom of the collapse of civilization.

So far, I have tried to explain Toynbee's approach to history. Looking at history as a set of experiences, Toynbee emphasized how important these experiences are in the decisions that human life will take for today and for the future. It is one of its basic principles that it should be evaluated with a holistic perspective while writing the history of nations. According to him, the historian should be objective, not nationalist, and seek the truth. In this respect, he created

10 Ibid, 17.

11 Ibid, 26.

12 Ibid, 26.

13 Toynbee, "Tarihin Faydası ve Değeri," 102.

14 Ibid, 101.

15 Ibid, 97.

16 Ibid, 102.

17 Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 321.

a study of history by analyzing twenty-six civilizations. Trying to understand history through civilizations, Toynbee analyzed how civilizations should behave in “challenge” and “response” situations in order to continue their existence. Civilizations continue to exist as long as the majority imitating the creative minority exists, and as long as appropriate responses are produced in challenge situations. Otherwise, according to the cycle he envisages, it disappears.

Ibn Khaldun¹⁸ defines history as “the way is a holy, beneficial, honorable science”. Because with this knowledge, the morals of the ummahs, the lives of the prophets and the politics of the kings are understood.¹⁹ In addition to this, for him, history is “information about human social organization, which itself is identical with world civilization. It deals with such conditions affecting the nature of civilization as, for instance, savagery and sociability, group feelings, and the different ways by which one group of human beings achieves superiority over another.”²⁰ We can understand from Khaldun’s approach that he identifies history with social life experiences. By this definition, he also indirectly states that social life and social relations affect the nature of civilization. Ibn Khaldun evaluates history through civilization and social life.

According to Ibn Khaldun his book, *Al ‘Ibar*, as a book of history is different from all previous histories in terms of many aspects. *Al ‘Ibar* is concerned with both the external and internal aspects of history; because Ibn Khaldun indicates the necessity of a critical attitude towards historical knowledge and uses the critical method.²¹

According to Muhsin Mahdi, Ibn Khaldun’s treatment of history at this point is a dialectical history of historical thought in general and of Islamic historiography in particular. Ibn Khaldun puts forward these ideas as a critique of the use of the narrator’s understanding in the tradition of hadith in Islam while conveying historical events. His intention is actually to show the necessity and usefulness of another science which he calls *ilm al-umran* for the rectification of historical reports.²² At this point, according to Ibn Khaldun, Tradition limits

itself to the criticism of authority but history has to use both the study of the nature of things and the critique of authority. History, then, needs two auxiliary sciences: a special science which established by himself, *ilm al-umran* which deals with the nature of historical events, and the critique of authority, which deals with the competence, knowledge, and motives of those who report such events.²³

According to him, most of the transmitter historians “followed the previous ones followed in their steps and passed that information on to us as they had heard it. They did not look for, or pay any attention to, the causes of events and conditions, nor did they eliminate or reject nonsensical stories”²⁴ Even these determinations alone give us important clues about Khaldun’s philosophy of history and methodology. According to him, while conducting historical studies, the transferred information should be analyzed in terms of conditions and reasons. After these reasons and conditions are revealed, they should be given due importance and the information should be evaluated accordingly. At the same time, information that is inconsistent with reason, contains contradictions, and is not compared with other data, which is reached through transmissions, cannot be valid historical data and information according to him. On the other hand, fragmented historical knowledge is a partial and external expression of something deeper and more general; and if a historian is ignorant of this deeper aspect of history, he cannot understand external knowledge.²⁵

According to him, a historian:

needs to know the principles of politics, the (true) nature of existent things, and the differences among nations, places, and periods with regard to ways of life, character qualities, customs, sects, schools, and everything else. He further needs a comprehensive knowledge of present conditions in all these respects. He must compare similarities or differences between the present and the past (or distantly located) conditions. He must know the causes of the similarities in certain cases and of the differences in others. He must be aware of the differing origins and beginnings of (different) dynasties and religious groups, as well as of the reasons and incentives that brought them into being and the circumstances and history of the persons who supported them. His goal must be to have complete knowledge of the reasons for every happening, and to be acquainted

18 Ibn Khaldun was born in Tunisia in 1332. He is originally from a Yemeni family. His life can be divided into three phases as reading, ruling and publishing. Khaldun, who came to important positions in administrative affairs, traveled every inch of Africa and the Mediterranean region. “*Muqaddimah*” was written as the preface, that is, the introduction to the book called *Al ‘Ibar* for short. And these works, in which he conveyed his experiences at every stage of his life, have been a source of inspiration for today’s researchers in the fields of economy, social, politics, culture, history and philosophy. For more information about his life and works see Robert Irwin, *Ibn Khaldun an Intellectual Biography* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018).

19 Tahsin Görgün, “İbn Haldun,” in *Diyanet İslam Ansiklopedisi*, 1999, 545.

20 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (Princeton University Press, 1958), 6.

21 Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun’s Philosophy of History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 147.

22 Ibid, 169–70.

23 Ibid, 155.

24 Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, 6–7.

25 Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun’s Philosophy of History*, 152.

with the origin of every event. Then, he must check transmitted information with the basic principles he knows. If it fulfills their requirements, it is sound. Otherwise, the historian must consider it as spurious and dispense with it.²⁶

This quote is quite clear for understanding Ibn Khaldun's philosophy of history. According to him, it is against the science of history to transfer the past information by memorizing individual events, without reasoning, without knowing the environment and conditions, without analyzing the causes and results, without making comparisons. Instead, the historian should analyze the events by reasoning, taking into account the relations between human groups, the similarities and differences between societies. As we have seen, Ibn Khaldun not only criticizes the transmitter historians, but also put forward a philosophy of history.

Ibn Khaldun analyzes culture and civilization in his historical method. This is one of his most important contributions to the philosophy of history. Because, according to him, when evaluating the history and experiences of human beings, who are social beings, the cultural values reflecting that period should not be neglected. Because for him, history is in reality information about human society which is the culture of the world in its diverse aspects.²⁷ At this point, we need to talk about the concept of *ilm al-umran*, which he associates with the science of history.

With the concept, *umran*, Ibn Khaldun tries to encompass all human institutions and to explain their nature, origins and causes in a demonstrative way.²⁸ This science basically studies the nature of human society and the causes of events. Its purpose is to reveal the inner side of the visible situations to be recorded by the science of history. According to Ibn Khaldun, history and this science, *ilm al-umran*, examine two aspects of the same reality. While history detects external events, *ilm al-umran* explains the nature and causes of the same events, so *ilm al-umran* and history are related in many ways as two different sciences. *Ilm al-umran* considers and explains external events determined by history. However, as I mentioned earlier, in order for the historian to detect these external events, he must have a minimal knowledge of their nature and causes. Hence, for Ibn Khaldun, history and cultural science should be combined in the work of the historian.²⁹ Ibn Khaldun makes analyzes in five different areas while detailing this science. These problems are with his conceptualizations: transition from

umran bedevi (bedouin) to *umran hadari* (settled), the state, the city, economic life, and the sciences.

According to him, *umran* manifests in two ways. Bedouin *umran* and *hadari umran*. By bedouin *umran*, he often refers to small communities with little population, involved in the cultivation of land and/or domestic animals. Bedouin *umran* refers to a lifestyle where only basic needs can be met, communities can only meet their own needs, are fed with simple foodstuffs, can wear animal skins or handmade things, live in simple houses, have no economy, no taxation, no art and knowledge.³⁰ Because these small groups do not live in complete isolation, they are in contact with other smaller groups and larger communities. They then engage in struggles for greater wealth, power, or anything else, both with groups of their own scale and with larger communities.³¹ This process of struggle is natural. Because the spirit of solidarity formed within the group tends to overpower the weaker one. Bedouin *umran* tends towards "hadari *umran*" with the desire for being stronger, richer, more satisfaction.³² The most important factor that provides this motivation is a kind of solidarity feeling that Ibn Khaldun calls "asabiyya". This feeling leads societies to meet each other's needs in case of peace, and to the desire to be against others, to conquer their lands and to dominate them in case of struggle or war.³³

According to Ibn Khaldun, the bedouin *umran* is considered incomplete. Because it only has the power to meet the needs of its own small community. Whereas, in extreme care, other needs that a person may desire are also met, apart from the essential needs.³⁴ The importance of the city phenomenon in his civilization system is very important. The city is the place where power, luxury, pleasure, rest are satisfied. For this reason, the bedouin *umran* is concerned about going to the *hadari umran*. Thus, it leads to the establishment of economic, political and scientific institutions that will form civilization.³⁵

Ibn Khaldun states that civilizations have developed and grown as a result of the struggles of people to reach more things in the city, and despite the continuation of desires over time, a stage has been reached where their power to be productive has decreased due to the factors that emerged in the development process. Then the forces that brought civilization

30 Ibid, 194.

31 Ibid, 198.

32 Ibid, 199.

33 Ibid, 263.

34 Ibid, 202.

35 Mahdi, 202.

26 Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, 56.

27 Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History*, 154.

28 Ibid, 159.

29 Mahdi, 171.

to this point begin to decline. Ultimately, civilization disintegrates with the dissolution of city institutions.³⁶

So far, I have tried to explain Ibn Khaldun's ideas on history. Ibn Haldun, who started his work by criticizing the transmitter historians, also reveals his own methodology. According to him, the historian should reason, take into account the social conditions and make comparisons while conveying historical information. Otherwise, the information he conveys would not be historical information. Ibn Khaldun, who analyzes the cyclical understanding of history through civilizations, claims that societies that have passed from a bedouin life to a hadari life collapsed after certain stages.

COMPARISON OF IBN KHALDUN AND TOYNBEE'S APPROACHES TO HISTORY

In my work, I have mentioned the approaches of Ibn Khaldun and Toynbee to the science of history so far. Both historians both wrote very valuable works for the science of history and developed a methodology that would inspire other historians. Ibn Khaldun inspired Toynbee as a historian who lived centuries before him. As I mentioned earlier in my study, Toynbee described Ibn Khaldun as a holistic historian and described his work as "the greatest work that mankind has ever created in all ages and places"³⁷ Although both scholars wrote the history of different geographies at different times, there are similarities in their ideas about history.

Toynbee defines history simply as the experiences of the past, whereas Ibn Khaldun sees it information about human social organization. Both of them take cultural values, social changes, beliefs, interactions of social groups with each other, which affect societies in the historical process, among their subjects of study.

Both historians criticize other historians regarding the methodology of history. Ibn Khaldun criticized the historians who conveyed information without reasoning, without considering social realities, without paying attention to geographical features, without making comparisons, and revealed his own understanding of history. Toynbee also criticizes historians who write the history of nations only by considering the internal realities of nations,

and offers them a comparative and integrative method of history.

Toynbee and Ibn Khaldun have a cyclical understanding of history. Toynbee makes these observations on civilizations and Ibn Khaldun on states. Ibn Khaldun is a social determinist in this regard, societies pass certain stages and collapse after the transition from umran bedouin to umran hadari. In his circular idea, Toynbee takes human will into account. Civilizations continue to exist as long as the appropriate responses to the challenges are produced and as long as the creative minority adapts to the majority.

While Ibn Haldun uses the term *asabiya* to express social commitment, Toynbee prefers the concept of mimesis to express social similarity. *Asabiya* is a natural feeling that holds certain communities together in war and peace. Mimesis, on the other hand, means that the majority in society produces a certain social similarity by imitating the creative minority.

While both historians develop a methodology for the science of history, they also put forward certain principles for historians. Toynbee states that the historian must be impartial. In particular, he prohibits historians who write the history of nations from changing information in favor of their own nation. In his work, Ibn Khaldun tells the historian to reason, make comparisons and not exaggerate knowledge.

The work of both scholars is quite extensive and detailed. However, due to the limited nature of my work, I preferred to analyze only the subjects I mentioned. It is possible to analyze the methods of these two scholars in more depth and with extra information.

³⁶ Ibid, 202.

³⁷ Barbara Stowasser, "Ibn Khaldun'un Tarih Felsefesi: Devletlerin ve Uygarlıkların Yükseliş ve Çöküşü" (Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi, 1984), 174.