

The Relevance of the Concept of Ashabiyah in the Dynamics of the Kurdish Ethnic Struggle in the Middle East

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Abstrak

This study examines the relevance of the concept of Ashabiyah, as proposed by Ibn Khaldun, in capturing the dynamics of the Kurdish struggle in the contemporary Middle East, particularly among Iraqi Kurds. The central issue underlying this study is how the Kurdish people, with their distinctive social solidarity, continue to struggle to preserve their identity and political rights amid external pressures and internal fragmentation. In this context, the study examines the extent to which the concept of ashabiyah can explain patterns of Kurdish solidarity and collective movements, as well as how regional social and political changes shape the manifestation of ashabiyah across the various stages of the Kurdish struggle, particularly among the Iraqi Kurds. The research findings indicate that the strength of group solidarity, as described by Ibn Khaldun, remains the primary foundation of the Kurdish ethnic group's resilience and political mobilization. Oppression and injustice have only strengthened ashabiyah. This is reflected in the efforts of Iraqi Kurds to consistently fight for their rights through political channels. In line with Ibn Khaldun's view, humans inherently do not wish to be under the authority of others, except when under the banner of ashabiyah. Ashabiyah rooted in a sense of unity and shared aspirations tends to be stronger than that based on blood ties. Thus, the concept of ashabiyah proves to remain relevant for understanding the consistency of the Kurdish movement and the resilience of their collective identity amidst the geopolitical shifts in the Middle East.

Keywords: *Ashabiyah, Geopolitics, Iraqi Kurds, Middle East*

Introduction

The concept of ashabiyah, popularized by Ibn Khaldun, has become a crucial foundation for understanding the social and political dynamics of humanity, particularly within the context of Islamic societies and ethnic group interactions. Ashabiyah, which refers to the spirit of collective solidarity and the bonds among group members, offers a critical perspective for mapping the social and political movements that emerge due to external pressures or internal dynamics. In the contemporary Middle East, the issue of Kurdish identity and the Kurdish ethnic struggle occupies a central position that cannot be separated from the study of ashabiyah. The political and social efforts of the Kurdish ethnic group to maintain their existence and secure rights and recognition amidst the hegemony of modern states demand a deep understanding of the factors of solidarity and internal group dynamics.¹

Empirically speaking, the Kurdish people are currently spread across regions including Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. However, to date, they have not succeeded

¹ David McDowall, *A Modern History of The Kurds* (London: IB Tauris, 2007). p. 157

in establishing an independent nation-state that is fully recognized by the international community. The Kurdish struggle continues to face challenges such as political marginalization in the countries where they reside, military intervention by external actors, and internal fragmentation marked by rivalries among political factions and the interests of local elites.² One of the most notable examples in the past decade was the 2017 referendum on the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, which briefly shook up the regional political landscape. However, the results were not recognized by the Iraqi central government and faced significant pressure from neighboring countries and the international community.³ This reality reflects how Kurdish internal solidarity, rooted in ashabiyah, has been able to achieve political consensus, yet at the same time faces limitations in responding to geopolitical challenges and elite fragmentation.

From a theoretical perspective, ashabiyah, as formulated by Ibn Khaldun, strongly shapes how Kurdish groups in Iraq have successfully mobilized collective power to withstand repression by the central government, establish local governance structures, and respond to external challenges, such as ISIS, the Iraqi central government, and foreign influence. Ashabiyah in the case of Iraqi Kurds manifests itself in kinship networks, tribal loyalties, and charismatic leadership, but it also reveals its limits when the political and economic interests of the elite begin to take precedence, causing collective solidarity to ebb and flow. As in the case of Turkish Kurds, the level of solidarity declines as politics and economics become overly prioritized.⁴

Over time, the Iraqi Kurdish people were subjected to expulsions and discrimination by Saddam Hussein's regime. In 1978 and 1979, approximately 600 Kurdish villages were burned, and around 200,000 Kurds were deported; whether they wanted to or not, they were forced to migrate to Turkey, Syria, and Iran. The motive behind the expulsions was the potential for oil in northern Iraq, where the majority of the population is Kurdish, particularly in the Kirkuk region.⁵

During the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi government implemented discriminatory policies against the Kurdish ethnic group, which sparked an armed conflict between Iraq and the Kurds. Despite condemnation from international organizations, Iraq did not face severe sanctions for its repressive actions. The Anfal Campaign was a systematic act of genocide against the Kurdish ethnic group in Iraq. From March

² McDowall, *A Modern History*..... p. 233-234

³ Cengiz Gunes, *The Kurds in a New Middle East: The Changing Geopolitics of a Regional Conflict* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). p. 28-30

⁴ Hamit Bozarslan, "Political Crisis and the Kurdish Issue in Turkey" in *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impact On Turkey And The Middle East*, ed. Robert Olson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015). p. 136-137

⁵ Ardi Tri Yuwono, "Diskriminasi Etnis Kurdi Di Türkiye Irak Iran Dan Syria Tahun 1918-2024," *ISTORIA: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Sejarah* 20, No. 2 (2024): 120-136. p. 127

29, 1987, to April 23, 1989, this campaign was escalated by the Iraqi army under the command of Saddam Hussein and Ali Hassan al-Majid, involving the genocide of the Kurdish ethnic group. These actions resulted in increased use of chemical weapons, the destruction of 2,000 Kurdish villages, and the genocide of Kurds in both rural and urban areas. The Anfal Campaign was part of the Arabization policy—a program to expel the Kurdish people and other ethnic groups from oil-rich regions and replace them with Arabs.⁶

In addition, studies conducted by McDowall (2007) and Gunes (2019) show that Kurdish solidarity is not without its challenges, particularly elite fragmentation, political party rivalries—such as those between the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan)—and tribal-based social structures that sometimes undermine national consensus.⁷ Gunes added that in the contemporary context, globalization and the spread of modern values are testing the flexibility of Kurdish ashabiyah, for example through the adoption of digital technology to consolidate the movement, the integration of the Kurdish diaspora into international networks, and the increased political participation of women within organizational structures.⁸

Furthermore, research conducted by Natali (2019) demonstrates that the success of the semi-autonomous Kurdish administration in Iraq is not merely the result of nationalist fervor or past experiences of massacres and expulsions, but is also underpinned by traditional ashabiyah-based bonds that have endured and strategically adapted. However, behind this lies the paradox of ashabiyah, where solidarity that fosters unity on one hand can become a factor of disintegration due to internal conflicts of interest, as has occurred between the KDP and the PUK over the past two decades.⁹

Although the KDP and PUK are vying for political power, these two political parties serve as important vehicles for the aspirations of the Iraqi Kurdish people. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), led by Mustafa Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Jalal Talabani, formed the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as a joint decision-making forum between the KDP and PUK in the Kurdish autonomous region. The KRG is supported by a formidable military force known as the Peshmerga, which was tasked with safeguarding and defending Kurdish interests in Iraq until the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime. Consequently, Jalal Talabani was elected as the official president of Iraq, while

⁶ Yuwono, "Diskriminasi Etnis Kurdi....."

⁷ McDowall, *A Modern History.....*; Gunes, *The Kurds in a New Middle East.....*

⁸ Gunes, *The Kurds in a New Middle East....* p. 32

⁹ Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq* (USA: Syracuse University Press, 2010). In <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1j5dg75>

Masoud Barzani served as the regional president of the Iraqi Kurdish autonomous region (KRG).¹⁰

By referring to various research findings and sources, it can be concluded that the relevance of ashabiyah in the context of the Kurdish ethnic struggle extends beyond a mere classical theoretical framework to become a primary analytical tool for understanding the political dynamics of minorities and the challenges of collective identity in the contemporary Middle East. This discussion becomes even more important when linked to predictions of regional geopolitical changes, making the actualization of the concept of ashabiyah a comprehensive reference for both academic study and policy practice.

By focusing on the Kurds in Iraq, this study plays a crucial role in testing the validity of the concept of ashabiyah amid contemporary sociopolitical transformations. This study not only enriches our understanding of the resilience and adaptability of Kurdish collective identity within the context of the modern nation-state but also offers a theoretical contribution to ensure that the concept of ashabiyah remains relevant and applicable for mapping the ethnopolitical dynamics in the region. Thus, this study seeks to bridge empirical analysis—specifically the realities of the Kurds' struggles and internal challenges in Iraq—with an analysis of Ibn Khaldun's concept of ashabiyah, in order to gain a comprehensive perspective on the solidarity, divisions, and political innovations of the contemporary Iraqi Kurdish community.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach based on library research, with an emphasis on the analysis of relevant primary and secondary literature. Data was collected from the works of Ibn Khaldun, contemporary research on the Kurds, and journals discussing political dynamics and ethnic identity, particularly in the case of Iraqi Kurds. The analysis was conducted using a descriptive-analytical approach, mapping the relevance of the theory of ashabiyah to the reality of the Kurdish struggle based on historical changes and current conditions.

Results and Discussion

Ibn Khaldun's Concept of Ashabiyah

According to Abd al-Raziq al-Makki, in his book titled *al-fikr al-Falsafi* 'inda Ibn Khaldun, the term ashabiyah is intertwined with the word *ashab*, which means

¹⁰ Eriksa Gutama, Surwandono, dan Ali Maksum, "Dinamika Perjuangan Suku Kurdi Iraq Dalam Memperoleh Status Wilayahnya Di Iraq," *Jurnal Noken: Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial* 8, No. 1 (2022): 15-26. p. 18

“relationship,” and ishabah, which means “bond.” Originally, the word ashabiyah referred to the mental bond connecting people who share a familial relationship. In Arabic, family can also be referred to as ashab or shahabah.¹¹

Furthermore, Thaha Hussein, in his work “La Philosophie Sociale d’ibn Khaldoun”, argues that the Arab people have excessively strong kinship ties. In the early days of Islam, the history of the Arab people was consistently dominated by a series of intertribal bloodsheds that invariably stemmed from ashabiyah. For him, ashabiyah derives from the word “shahabah”, which means “group.”¹²

According to Muhammad Mahmoud Rabi, in his book “The Political Theory of Ibn Khaldun”, before Islam, the term “ashabiyah” referred to close ties within the family. The result of these close ties was the strengthening of a blind, unconditional loyalty toward one’s family. After the advent of Islam, the practice of ashabiyah was condemned due to its negative effects on Muslims, leading to widespread calls to abandon it.¹³

On the one hand, ashabiyah has a negative effect that reinforces indiscriminate mutual support. On the other hand, ashabiyah plays a role in ensuring the success of any endeavor involving the public. Whatever the cause, it must incorporate ashabiyah. In fact, even religion and the religious laws revealed by Allah require ashabiyah to ensure their success.¹⁴

According to Ibn Khaldun, the reason the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) forbade ashabiyah is that it involves taking pride in one’s lineage and ancestors. This contradicts the Qur’anic verse that establishes that the most noble person in the sight of Allah is the one who is pious. However, the situation is different when ashabiyah is used to uphold Allah’s law and carry out His commands. If ashabiyah is eliminated in this practice, then the laws of religion are also eliminated.¹⁵

If the familial bond between two people who help one another is very strong, then it is certain that there is a blood relationship and that there is also an absolute sense of solidarity. However, if the familial bond between two people is not very strong, then a sense of kinship based on the awareness of brotherhood arises.¹⁶

¹¹ Zainab al-Khudhairi, *Filsafat Sejarah Ibn Khaldun*, Translator. Ahmad Rofi’ ‘Ustamani (Bandung: Penerbit Pustaka, 1979). p. 144; ‘Abd al-Raziq al-Makki, *al-Fikr al-Falsafi ‘Inda Ibn Khaldun* (Iskandariah: Muassasah al-Tsaqafah al-Jami’iyyah, 1970). p. 155

¹² al-Khudhairi, *Filsafat Sejarah*..... p. 145; Thaha Hussein, *La Philosophie Sociale d’ibn Khaldoun* (Paris: No Publisher, 1918). p. 107

¹³ al-Khudhairi, *Filsafat Sejarah*..... p. 143-144; Muhammad Mahmoud Rabi, *The Political Theory of Ibn Khaldun* (Leiden: E.J Brill, 1967). p. 48-49

¹⁴ Abdul Rahman Zainuddin, *Kekuasaan dan Negara: Pemikiran Politik Ibnu Khaldun* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1992). p. 127

¹⁵ Zainuddin, *Kekuasaan dan Negara*..... p. 129

¹⁶ al-Khudhairi, *Filsafat Sejarah*..... p. 142

Essentially, ashabiyah is not based solely on family ties. According to Muhammad Ali Nasy'at, ashabiyah can be grounded in a sense of brotherhood and mutual love that develops among individuals, resulting in a form of social solidarity.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Abdurrahman Badawi argues that ashabiyah thrives on racism, since it is based solely on kinship ties. This could happen if ashabiyah were the sole determining factor in kinship relationships. However, that is not the case in reality.

According to Ibn Khaldun, ashabiyah is found in the Qur'anic account of Prophet Yusuf's brothers (Surah Yusuf; 14) as they spoke to their father:

قَالُوا لَبَنٌ أَكَلَهُ الذِّئْبُ وَنَحْنُ عُصْبَةٌ إِنَّا إِذَا لُخِرُونَ

Meaning: They said, "If a wolf were to devour it, even though we are a strong group, we would truly be the ones to suffer a loss."

According to Ibn Khaldun's interpretation of this verse, "if people possess ashabiyah, then there will be no more anxiety or panic, whether in the form of aggression or hostility that threatens individuals or social groups." This ashabiyah arises from mutual understanding and shared goals, beginning with small groups and eventually forming a large community. The strength of lineage possessed by the Quraysh tribe enabled them to become leaders among the Arab tribes of that time. Due to the capabilities and strength possessed by the Quraysh tribe, they gained recognition from other tribes, and were thus entrusted to lead the Arab nation. Furthermore, faith also served as a unifying factor in this solidarity.¹⁸

Ashabiyah plays a role in the political and social spheres. In the political sphere, Yves Lacoste argues that ashabiyah requires a leader who has garnered the support of his peers. As Ibn Khaldun noted, ashabiyah is a political force that leads to the formation of a state or kingdom. Thus, leadership is a prerequisite for the existence of ashabiyah, and a strong ashabiyah is a force that dominates other ashabiyahs.¹⁹ Meanwhile, regarding its role in the social sphere, Rabi, in his book "The Political Theory of Ibn Khaldun," notes that ashabiyah serves as a social bond capable of fostering national unity, regardless of whether it arises from family ties or alliances. Rabi adds that in the social sphere, ashabiyah serves two functions:

¹⁷ Muhammad Ali Nasy'at, *al-Fiqr al-Iqtishadi fi Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldun* (Kairo: Tanpa Penerbit, 1944). p. 44

¹⁸ Syibran Mulasi, Warul Walidin, Silahuddin, "Konsep Sosiologis Dalam Pendidikan Perspektif Ibn Khaldun; Suatu Analisis Psikopedagogik" *At-Ta'dib: Jurnal Ilmiah Prodi Pendidikan Agama Islam* 15, No. 2 (Desember 2023): 207 – 219. p. 211-212

¹⁹ Muhammad Faqih Nidzom dan Fiqhi Akbar Rafsanjani, "The Historical Criticism and Causality in The Philosophy of History: Ibn Khaldun's Perspective" *Tsaqafah: Jurnal Peradaban Islam* 18, No. 1 (2022): 227-246. p. 239

first, fostering solidarity and strength within society; and second, uniting various opposing ashabiyah groups into a well-consolidated and cohesive social group.²⁰

The ultimate goal of ashabiyah is sovereignty. Ashabiyah is inherent in human nature and can take the form of blood ties or the relationship between protector and the protected. According to Ibn Khaldun, it was particularly the Arabs whose shared beliefs enabled them to successfully establish a dynasty. For Ibn Khaldun, the Arab people are the most unwilling to submit to one another; they are rough, arrogant, ambitious, and each wants to be a leader. What unites them is the religion brought by their respective prophets, which brings them together.

According to Ibn Khaldun, in a state, religion continues to occupy an important position as a truth that must be realized in reality. Religion is the foundation and basis for the development of the state. It is a unifying force (*ukhuwah*) and a source of political legitimacy that strengthens the state. Without a religious foundation, group unity is based solely on a sense of natural unity (*ashabiyah*) formed by tribal similarities or kinship ties. This natural unity is relatively fragile, and a religious foundation is necessary to underpin that sense of unity.²¹

This is primarily because religion is capable of ensuring the morality and virtue of the group, curbing individual greed and cruelty, and serving as a unifying force that shields them from social conflict. However, once corrupted or tainted, religion loses its legitimacy as a social bond. Ultimately, the group will be based on a fragile natural unity that will sooner or later lead to its destruction. The existing ashabiyah is based solely on tribalism, making it impossible to establish a state due to their rigid nature. Thanks to the presence and solely because of the religion brought by the Prophet Muhammad, they were able to unite and remain under control.²²

However, on the other hand, religious motivation alone is not enough; what is still needed is ashabiyah. Religion can strengthen ashabiyah and enhance its potential, but it still requires other motivations beyond religion. Homogeneity also plays a role in the formation of a great dynasty. It is rare for a dynasty to exist in an ethnically diverse region, because in such circumstances, each tribe has differing interests, aspirations, and perspectives, making the formation of such a dynasty difficult to achieve. Only homogeneity can foster strong solidarity and create a great

²⁰ Muhammad Mahmoud Rabi, *The Political Theory of Ibn Khaldun* (Leiden: E.J Brill, 1967). p. 165

²¹ Agung Prayogo dan Indra Harahap, "An Examination of Ibn Khaldun's History and Islamic Political Thought" *AS-SALAM: Journal Islamic Social Sciences and Humanities* 1, No. 1 (2023): 23-33. p. 28

²² Theguh Saumantri dan Abdillah, "Teori Ashabiyah Ibnu Khaldun Sebagai Model Perkembangan Peradaban Manusia" *Tamaddun: Jurnal Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Islam* 8, No 1 (Juli 2020): 21-38. p. 29

dynasty. Regarding ashabiyah, Ibn Khaldun argued that there must be someone from the dominant group who can dominate the existing groups. This is because governing a state, maintaining order, and protecting it from enemy threats—both external and internal—requires the support and loyalty of the people. This can only be achieved if a leader comes from the dominant group.²³

For Ibn Khaldun, the existence of a strong leader within a state is a divine mandate. Every society needs a moderator or mediator to guide it toward becoming an even better society. Ibn Khaldun reaffirms the primary duties of a leader, namely safeguarding the religion and exercising political leadership. In fact, al-Ghazali argued that a tyrannical leader is better than no leader at all. The absence of a leader leads a state into disorder and chaos.²⁴

A leader has the duty and responsibility to implement Sharia law, because without it, society will fall into chaos and the state will collapse. The state must also guarantee the rights of its citizens and is responsible for ensuring their well-being so that they may live in prosperity through equitable development. A prosperous society will certainly fulfill their obligations of zakat, infaq, sadaqah, and waqf as efforts to realize economic justice. When society is prosperous, they can build infrastructure such as educational institutions and training centers, religious facilities, commercial centers, industrial facilities, roads, and bridges leading to the production sector, and so on. All of this development should be aimed at realizing justice and the equitable distribution of the people's welfare. When the economy is strong, the state can also be effectively managed.²⁵

Ibn Khaldun argued that if a state's capacity to manage its resources is already sufficient—or if the state has become sophisticated—then the role of ashabiyah will diminish and may even be permanently abandoned by society. If ashabiyah bonds fade, then eventually, national bonds will follow the same path. This occurs because the common sense that gave birth to the state has vanished. It is like a cycle of life: the emergence of another group with stronger ashabiyah bonds that is ready to seize state power.²⁶

Ibn Khaldun provides the example of the Abbasid dynasty. Initially, its political power was founded on ashabiyah—a sense of solidarity among those sharing a bloodline with Abbas ibn Abdul Muthallib. After experiencing several phases of successful leadership up to the reigns of Mu'tashim and Watsiq, this

²³ Siti Khikmatul Rizqi, "Solidarity Theory in the Modern Government Development Plan (A Study of The Thought of Ibn Khaldun)" *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research (ASSEHR)* 163 (2017): 273-277. p. 275

²⁴ Mun'im Sirry, *Interaksi Islam: Bergelut Dengan Teks dan Konteks* (Yogyakarta: SUKA Press, 2024). p. 225-226

²⁵ Hasna Maliha, "Ibn Khaldun's concept of Economic, Social and Political Relations" *Islamic Economic and History* 1, No. 1 (2022): 1-5. p. 3-4

²⁶ Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946). p. 396

familial solidarity began to fade, thereby affecting political bonds. Although they remained within the Abbasid political dynasty, the political leaders who emerged were no longer exclusively from the lineage of Abbas. This was evidenced by the rise of leaders from the Seljuk dynasty to rule the Abbasid dynasty.²⁷

The concept of ashabiyah carries two meanings: one that is destructive and one that is constructive. Ashabiyah can be destructive if it is used to overthrow the government or local rulers. This meaning of ashabiyah does not only occur in societies that still maintain a natural or tribal (badawah) socio-political system, but can also occur in modern and established (hadarah) socio-political systems. Meanwhile, ashabiyah can be constructive if used to control, monitor, and encourage the government to carry out its duties and functions properly and responsibly.²⁸

The Struggle of the Iraqi Kurds

The Kurdish people, as a nation, live in a fragmented world—some in Iraq, others in Iran, Syria, and Turkey. The border between Iran and Iraq largely reflects the clash between the Persian and Ottoman Empires as they expanded in the 16th century. A subsequent treaty between Persia and Turkey formalized a mountainous border that indiscriminately divided the Kurdish population on both sides.²⁹

The Kurdish people are an ethnic group with a relatively long history, but their sense of a distinct territory and sphere of influence has only emerged recently—and one might say it has come far too late. The Kurdish people possess a sense of ethnic identity but lack a sense of a sovereign territory. This is reflected in their traditional nomadic way of life, in which they move from place to place while herding livestock from Turkey and Iran into the Mesopotamian valley.³⁰

After World War I, most nations began to define and establish their borders. From there, Kurdish ethnic awareness of their territory emerged. The Kurdish people's aspiration is to establish a secular and democratic state. They are a minority group that has always been "marginalized" by the countries under whose jurisdiction they fall. This is what drives their desire to secede and achieve full independence. However, this dream will not come true because the Kurdish people

²⁷ Moh. Ilyas Rolis dan Dodik Harnadi, "Terbentuknya Negara Dalam Konsep Pemikiran Ibnu Khaldun" *Jurnal Review Politik* 11, No. 1 (2021): 140-155. Hlm. 150. See also Ibnu Khaldun, *Al-Tarif Bi-Ibn Khaldun Wa-Rihlatihi Gharban Wa-Sharqan* (Lajnat al-Talif wa-al-Tarjamah wa-al-Nashr, 1951). p. 309

²⁸ Khairul Amin, "Badawah & Hadarah: Konsep Sosiologi Ibn Khaldun" *Jurnal Sosiologi Agama* 12, No. 1 (Januari-Juni 2018): 85-98. p. 91

²⁹ Michael J. Kelly, *The Genocide of the Iraqi Kurds and Trial of Saddam Hussein* (Creighton Lawyer, 2005). p. 12

³⁰ Andre Titalessy, Johanis Steny Franco Peilouw, dan Veriana Josepha Batseba Rehatta, "Perspektif Hukum Internasional Terhadap Suku Bangsa Kurdi yang Stateless" *TATOHI: Jurnal Ilmu Hukum* 4, No 1 (2024): 1 - 10. p. 8

are scattered across many regions. Consequently, their original aspiration for national independence has shifted; now, they focus solely on regional autonomy.³¹

Donald Trump once described himself as a big fan of the Kurdish people and strongly defended Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons against them. In fact, he reportedly told many people that he loved this ethnic group deeply. Most people, however, are skeptical of his statements regarding the Kurds. This is reflected in U.S. policy toward the Kurds dating back to the presidency of Woodrow Wilson. This Middle Eastern ethnic group has fought for independence while maintaining close ties with the United States (U.S.), but it seems unlikely to achieve it unless the decision benefits the U.S. However, many Iraqi Kurds fondly recall the U.S. Operation "Providence Comfort" to protect them from Saddam Hussein's aggression.³²

The Kurdish people in Iraq do indeed face a unique struggle. This path is indeed the path toward statehood. They are often viewed as the "good Kurds" by the West (in contrast to the Syrian Kurds and Turkish Kurds, who are a major concern for many potential allies). However, their alliance with the U.S. has historically served only U.S. interests. Iraqi Kurds have been fighting for recognition and autonomy since 1918. Although this recognition has been periodically denied by the British, the Iraqi central government, and the international community, the Barzani family has led the struggle for freedom and continues to do so to this day. During autonomy negotiations with Iraq in 1970, the U.S. covertly supported Kurdish rebels in Iraq to assist the U.S.-backed Shah of Iran. However, in 1975, Iraq and Iran resolved their dispute in Algeria, and the U.S., led by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, promptly abandoned the Kurds. Before his death, Mustafa Barzani sadly stated that the Kurds did not want to be anyone's pawn. The Kurds are an ancient people. We Kurds deeply desire our own autonomy. We want *sarbasti*—freedom. Barzani was firmly convinced that the Kurdish people would not be easily crushed and would always remain united in the struggle for independence.³³

Barzani's words clearly reflect the values of *ashabiyah*. To this day, the Iraqi Kurds continue to fight for their right to independence. It is not only the Iraqi Kurds, but all regions inhabited by Kurds that remain united in the independence movement. Independence is not achieved through complacency or idleness, but

³¹ Ahmad Khoirul Mizan, "Etnis Kurdi: Perjuangan Memperoleh Otonomi Khusus di Irak (1920-1991) (Skripsi: Jurusan Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Islam, Fakultas Adab dan Humaniora, UIN Jakarta, 2015). p. 43-44

³² Julia Maenza, "The Kurdish Struggle for Autonomy from 1970s to the President." 26 Juli 2019. Dalam <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/07/the-kurdish-struggle-for-autonomy-from-the-1970s-to-the-present/>. Accessed in November, 20 2025

³³ Maenza, "The Kurdish Struggle for Autonomy....."

through struggle and challenges. Like the Kurds, they have experienced much discrimination, oppression, and deprivation of rights.

Under the Hashemite regime, the Kurdish people, represented by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), were not integrated into the political system. Given Iraq's Arab-oriented background, the Hashemite regime did not permit the legalization of Kurdish parties, even if those parties were supportive of the Hashemite regime. The fundamental reason was that ethnically oriented parties could threaten national unity. The formation of Arab nationalist parties was viewed differently, even though these Arab parties sought to dissolve Iraq in favor of a pan-Arab state. The Kurdistan Democratic Party not only began to reject the monarchy and its domestic and foreign policies but also shifted ideologically to the left. Since the 1950s, this party has appeared to be Marxist-oriented in its program. After World War II, Kurdish nationalism became an urban phenomenon. Tribes no longer represented the Kurds' goal of independence; rather, it was the urban middle class, consisting of the new Kurdish intellectuals.³⁴

After the 1991 Gulf War, Shiite groups in the south and Kurds in the north rebelled against Saddam Hussein's regime. However, Iraqi forces quickly crushed the poorly organized uprisings. The advance of Iraqi forces toward Kurdish cities created panic and chaos among civilians. The Kurds feared that Saddam Hussein would use chemical weapons again, as he had in 1988 when he attacked the city of Halabja with chemical weapons, killing more than 5,000 civilians. Approximately 1.8 million people fled to the Turkish and Iranian borders seeking refuge. In response, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 687, which called on the Iraqi government to end the oppression of civilians and allow international humanitarian agencies immediate access to the country to help address the refugee crisis. To further alleviate the refugee crisis, the U.S., in coordination with the UK and France, established a no-fly zone over northern Iraq and created safe havens for the Kurdish people. The U.S. and international actors addressed the suffering of the Kurdish people solely on the basis of humanitarian values.³⁵

Following the withdrawal of U.S. and allied forces in late 1991, Kurdish parties and the Iraqi army engaged in armed conflict. Eventually, the Iraqi government withdrew its personnel and military from Kurdish territories and imposed an economic embargo. Pressure to establish an effective local government prompted the Iraqi Kurdistan Front to hold general elections in May 1992. The goal was to establish a local government capable of providing public services in areas inhabited by the Kurdish people. This process led to the formation of the Kurdish

³⁴ Ferhad Ibrahim Seyder, "The Iraqi Kurds: Historical Backgrounds of a Nonstate Nation" dalam *Between State and Non-State Politics and Society in Kurdistan-Iraq and Palestine*, ed. Gülistan Gürbey, Sabine Hofmann, dan Ferhad Ibrahim Seyder (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 28

³⁵ Leezenberg, "Humanitarian Aid..... p. 36

National Assembly and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Although the international community observed that the general elections were free and fair, there was no political recognition from the Iraqi government. In 2005, the KRG gained constitutional legitimacy from the Federal Republic of Iraq. Since 2005, the KRG has become a symbol for Kurds worldwide. It is the only place where Kurds technically govern themselves. Despite not achieving full independence, this semi-autonomous region wields significant political influence within the international community.³⁶

After the KRG was established in 1992, the long-standing conflict between the two main Kurdish political factions, the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party), resurfaced.³⁷ Between 1994 and 1998, the two sides were engaged in a civil war known as the “brakuji.” The brakuji is regarded as one of the darkest periods in Kurdish history. Both sides sought cooperation from the governments of Iraq, Turkey, and Iran to expand their power within the Kurdistan Region. For example, the PUK sought support from Iran, while the KDP struck a deal with Saddam Hussein to secure aid and expel PUK forces from its territory. Ultimately, both sides declared a ceasefire in 1998.³⁸

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 created a new political landscape in the KRG. Following Iraq’s constitutional recognition of Iraqi Kurdistan as a federal region in 2005, the PUK and KDP merged their party governments into a single administration and designated Erbil as the capital of the IKR (Iraqi Kurdistan Region). In 2005, KDP leader Masoud Barzani was appointed president of the IKR, and PUK official Kosrat Rasul Ali was appointed vice president. In 2006, the Kurds finalized the draft of the Kurdistan Regional Constitution, which was subsequently approved by the KRG parliament in 2009. Although a new political order emerged in Iraq in the post-2003 period, internal disputes, corruption, and partisan rivalry continue to undermine Kurdish unity. As Gunter points out, a significant number of Kurdish officials have long prioritized personal and partisan interests over the collective interests of the Kurds.³⁹ The KDP and the PUK are competing for revenue generated from oil and five trade routes—Ibrahim al-Khalil, Faysh Khabur, Haj Omran, Bashmagh, and Parvez Khan. Both parties are suspected of using this revenue for personal gain rather than to build a strong regional economy.⁴⁰

³⁶ Jihan A. Mohammed dan Abdullah F. Alrebh, “Iraqi Kurds: The Dream Of Nation State” *Digest of Middle East Studies* 0, No. 0 (2020): 1-15. p. 3-4. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12216>

³⁷ Hawre Hasan Hama dan Dastan Jasim, “The Loss of Disputed Territories: What is next for the Kurdistan Region?” *MERIA: Middle East Review of International Affairs* 21, No. 2 (2017): 58-68. p. 60

³⁸ Mohammed dan Alrebh, “Iraqi Kurds: The Dream..... p. 4

³⁹ Michael M. Gunter, “Kurdish Disunity in Historical Perspective” *Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, 19 (2018): 26-45. p. 26

⁴⁰ Gareth R. V. Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2003). p. 151

For Ibn Khaldun, unity can only be achieved if there is a single, highly dominant group that acts as a unifying force for many other groups, thereby creating a new unity that is both enduring and highly influential.⁴¹ Looking at the PUK and the KDP, both were able to unite their forces because of a unifying factor: seizing the opportunity presented by the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which had weakened the Iraqi state. This, in turn, encouraged the Kurds to establish their own autonomous region. Before this opportunity arose, there was no unifying factor; there was no reason for these two parties to unite. In essence, the Arab people living in the desert do not like to be governed and ruled by others. This stems from their nomadic, harsh, and self-centered way of life, in which they are constantly struggling to survive.⁴²

According to Ibn Khaldun, humans are essentially creatures of power. Humans are inextricably linked to power. This is evident in how a nation or state can face rapid decline when separated from power and exploited by others. When power is not in the hands of a particular group, that group loses its zest for life, and all hope vanishes. Likewise, ashabiyah vanishes along with them. Once they fall under the domination of others, they too become mere tools.⁴³ If they haven't given up yet and there's still a chance, then they'll get back up and try again.

The Kurdish people have always strived to avoid living under the rule of another nation. In this regard, the Kurds have chosen to engage in disputes and conflicts with the Iraqi government in order to defend their rights. In the conflict with the Iraqi government over Kirkuk, the Kurds maintain that they have lived there long before Iraq became a nation. This is why the Kurds seek independence and wish to secede from Iraq. The Kurdish people feel that the Iraqi government has oppressed them by disregarding their interests. Kirkuk, with its oil reserves, makes the Iraqi government in Baghdad unwilling to simply relinquish the city. Economically, if Kirkuk were no longer part of Iraqi territory, Iraq would undoubtedly lose one of its economic resources, including its oil supply. The Kurdish movement to secede from parts of Iraqi territory is viewed as a separatist movement. Such phenomena are common in regions with abundant natural resources. Disputes between the government and certain ethnic groups in resource-rich regions often lead to prolonged conflict between the two sides.⁴⁴ Here, a strong sense of community, rooted in shared aspirations and a sense of unity, is deeply ingrained.

⁴¹ Zainuddin, *Kekuasaan dan Negara*..... p. 118

⁴² al-Khudhairi, *Filsafat Sejarah Ibn Khaldun*..... p. 150

⁴³ Zainuddin, *Kekuasaan dan Negara*..... p. 99-101

⁴⁴ Nandang Nurdiansah, "Natural Resources and Conflict: A Dispute of Kurds and the Iraqi Government in Kirkuk," *MECRI: Middle Eastern Culture & Religion Issue* 2, No. 1 (2023): 1-18. p. 12

This conflict can arise when individuals or groups call for action on this issue. Subsequently, the majority of the public endorses and acts upon what these individuals or groups have called for. From this, a leadership movement emerges to combat injustice and defend rights. If this leadership endures and gains the support of more individuals or groups, it eventually reaches the highest level of power—that of the state.⁴⁵

Ashabiyah can stem from blood ties, shared aspirations, and a sense of unity. Ashabiyah rooted in shared aspirations and a sense of unity typically forms stronger bonds than that stemming from blood ties. Ashabiyah based on blood ties tends to foster hostility and conflict among its members. However, it is not impossible for ashabiyah stemming from a sense of unity to have positive connotations. This can be addressed through religion. Religion can foster unity by eliminating the jealousy and envy that often plague ashabiyah groups.⁴⁶ However, if we look at the sense of Kurdish identity in Iraq, it seems that religion is not the crux of the matter, but rather a matter of identity alone. In fact, the Kurdish people are deeply religious, to the point that Sufi orders have emerged from among Kurdish scholars—the Naqshbandi order, for example.⁴⁷

After achieving semi-autonomous status, the struggle of the Iraqi Kurds continues. In 2017, the Iraqi Kurds held a referendum and sought public support for full independence from the Iraqi government. In response to the referendum, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran immediately took serious measures, including threats of sanctions and embargoes, which undermined the KRG's status quo. The international community strongly opposed the separation of the Kurds from Iraq. In 2017, they reiterated that Iraq's territorial integrity must be preserved. Representatives from the UN, the United States, and the United Kingdom met with Masoud Barzani and advised postponing the referendum, even offering an "alternative proposal." However, Barzani rejected the offer because it did not guarantee future support for Kurdish independence. International support for the Kurds (such as the establishment of "safe zones" following the 1991 Gulf War) tends to be treated exclusively within a humanitarian context, rather than as support for full independence.⁴⁸

The fate of an ashabiyah varies. Some succeed in reaching the pinnacle of power and becoming an independent nation. Others must cooperate with the state in which the ashabiyah resides, meaning they are not self-governing. Still others are embraced by other nations, lured by the promise of independence, merely to serve

⁴⁵ Zainuddin, *Kekuasaan dan Negara*..... p. 248

⁴⁶ Zainuddin, *Kekuasaan dan Negara*..... p. 160-165

⁴⁷ Martin van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren dan Tarekat: Tradisi-Tradisi Islam di Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Gading Publishing, 2012). p. 128-130

⁴⁸ Mohammed dan Alrebh, "Iraqi Kurds: The Dream..... p. 8-9

the interests of those nations. However, regardless of the fates of these ashabiyah groups, they all strive intensely to attain the highest form of power: state power.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The concept of ashabiyah, as proposed by Ibn Khaldun, remains highly relevant as a primary analytical tool for understanding the resilience and political mobilization of the Kurdish people in the Middle East. Ashabiyah, defined as a spirit of collective solidarity and bonding among group members, serves as the primary foundation for confronting the oppression, discrimination, and injustice experienced by Kurds in the countries where they reside. This solidarity manifests not only through traditional kinship ties but, more importantly, through bonds of unity and shared aspirations to secure political rights and preserve their collective existence—bonds that, according to Ibn Khaldun, tend to be stronger. This reality is reflected in the ongoing efforts of Iraqi Kurds to secure autonomous status and their refusal to remain perpetually in the shadow of the Iraqi government's authority.

Although ashabiyah serves as a unifying force, this study identifies an internal paradox: solidarity can transform into a factor of disintegration due to elite conflicts of interest. This is most clearly evident in the rivalry between the two main Iraqi Kurdish political factions, namely the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan). The competition between the KDP and the PUK over oil revenues and trade routes demonstrates that personal and partisan interests are often prioritized over the collective interests of the Kurds. It even triggered a civil war (*brakuji*) between 1994 and 1998. These corrupt and fragmented internal dynamics—which are a manifestation of destructive Ashabiyah—became a weak point that hindered the achievement of a unified national vision, even though they were able to establish a semi-autonomous local government (KRG).

These internal weaknesses were exacerbated by strong geopolitical pressures, which ultimately led to the failure of the 2017 Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum. The referendum was strongly rejected by the Iraqi Central Government and triggered threats of sanctions and embargoes from neighboring regional states, particularly Iran and Turkey, which oppose the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. Furthermore, the international community has consistently affirmed the principle of Iraq's territorial integrity and refused to recognize the referendum's results. International support provided to the Kurds (e.g., the establishment of safe zones after 1991) tends to be treated exclusively within a humanitarian context, rather than as support for full political independence. Thus, although Kurdish

⁴⁹ Zainuddin, *Kekuasaan dan Negara*..... p. 134

ashabiyah has been able to mobilize popular support, elite fragmentation and geopolitical opposition demonstrate that the dream of a Kurdish nation-state has not yet been realized and remains a struggle, reinforcing once again its original goal: Kurdish independence.

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