More than six centuries after his death the insights of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) into the politics and society of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) can still help us understand the power of the tribal or quasi tribal coteries that hold sway in much of the region. The chaos in Iraq and Libya following the US and NATO interventions, the survival of the Assad regime in Syria after more than six years of civil war, the bitter conflict in Yemen and the dangers facing Saudi Arabia can all be viewed with reference to the Khaldunian paradigm. In the contemporary version of the Khaldunian paradigm ‘asabiyya – the term widely employed by the great Arab savant to denote ‘group solidarity’ or ‘clannism’ - power relations based on tribal or quasi tribal systems are now linked to the apparatus of both ‘deep state’ and rentier economies, using the ‘carrots and sticks’ of patronage and repression. In much of the Arab world ‘asabiyya has continued to dominate systems of governance built on party organizations representing commercial or class interests, including ideological and even religious orientations.

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