

Brilliant in his obscurity: Ibn Khaldoun is experts' choice as millennial Arab

ARAB PERSONALITY

Ibn Khaldoun

Philosopher

by Oren Gruenbaum

The New Year is inevitably a time for reflection on 12 months of successes and failures. These yearly reflections tend to breed lists. This year – even though it is not really the end of the millennium – the scope of these lists has been extended ten-fold.

Time magazine ran a poll for person of the century, only to find Adolf Hitler and Elvis Presley quickly became the front-runners ahead of such worthies as Einstein and Gandhi. We asked who was the most outstanding person of the last 1,000 years in the Arab world – and the name we came up with may be just as surprising.

But before going into the answer, what about the question: how to compare the achievements of leaders and intellectuals, of philosophers and musicians? Should only those ethnically Arab be considered or a wider definition embraced – one that includes those linguistically and culturally Arab, whatever their origins? Should extra weight be given to the successes of women, considering their general exclusion from learning and power until this century?

We published profiles of a shortlist of possible candidates: Saladin, Nasser, Ibn Battuta, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Khaldoun, al-Ghazali, Muhammad Ali, Yasser Arafat, Umm Kulthoum, Fairouz, and Khalil Gibran. There were several other contenders, among them Ibn Sina, the philosopher and theorist who produced a medical text that remained a standard for hundreds of years; the Nobel prize-winning Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz, who could be said to have almost invented the novel as an Arabic art form; and Musa ibn Maymun, better known as Maimonides, the great Jewish doctor and philosopher-scholar.

To weigh up the competing claims of these nominees we assembled a panel of experts: Ramez Maluf, the head of the Arts and Communication division of the Lebanese American University and a specialist in the history of science; Najla Hamadeh, who also lectures at the LAU and has written on feminism and psychoanalysis; Chibli Mallat, a lawyer, writer and professor of law at St. Joseph University; and Michael Young, a writer and analyst at the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies.

From the start, it was agreed that this had to be a choice of "personality of the Arab world," rather than any strict definition of Arab, even if such a thing could be found. Najla Hamadeh pointed out that the Middle East, at the junction of Asia, Africa

and Europe, "has always been a melting pot of races."

Michael Young noted that: "The notion of Arab is a relatively new one and was frankly not relevant 1,000 or 500 years ago ... there are individuals who must be included simply because they are so fundamentally a part of Arab culture."

It would also seem to go against the spirit of what for centuries was the most cosmopolitan and ethnically diverse empire in the world. To exclude non-Arabs would be to bar Saladin (a Kurd), Ibn Battuta (a Berber), Maimonides (a Jew), Ibn Sina (from Bukhara) and Muhammad Ali (Albanian), among others.

The idea of using some sort of handicap system to allow the relatively few women to have emerged from obscurity over the last 10 centuries to compete against the greatest rulers and intellectuals was also given short shrift. Perhaps surprisingly for a leading female scholar, Hamadeh dismissed the idea: "I don't like the handicap system – we must choose the most important people."

Fairouz, one of the two women in the shortlist, fell at this first fence. Her distinct voice may have symbolized the hopes of a nation, but that was not going to be enough.

Umm Kulthoum, however, centered on for a few lengths. "An argument can be constructed for Umm Kulthoum," said Maluf. "She transformed people's sensibilities."

Mallat seemed to agree for a moment. "She is the greatest Arab vocalist this century," he said, before adding, "but some prefer Sabah!"

The last Lebanese – Khalil Gibran – did not last much longer. While everybody acknowledged the prodigious publishing success of *The Prophet* – often cited as the best-selling book after the Bible – his pseudo-mystical homilies found no champions around the table, and his art now seems little more than a pastiche of William Blake.

"He merits some kind of recognition," said Young. "I personally don't take to his brand of idealistic writing, but I can't deny that most of those who read him consider him a major influence."

"We dropped Gibran from the LAU course on civilization," Hamadeh pointed out.

Other names were kicked around and gradually dismissed. Mallat wanted the poet Abu al-Tayyeb al-Mutanabbi. "He's our Shakespeare – the greatest poet in our history. He was the author of such eternal lines as 'Every time a reed was born, man has sought to turn it into a spear.'"

He may have been great but he was also in the wrong millennium, dying 32 years too early to make it into consideration.

By this stage, the philosopher Ibn Rushd, pioneering geographer Ibn Battuta, and Muhammad Ali, the modernizing Egyptian pasha, were fading fast.

Arafat now picked up the running. He was, said Young, "the representative of the main Arab cause of the 20th century." But he went on to discount his own suggestion: "But his more recent behavior and his rather unre-



Ibn Khaldoun, statesman and political thinker is our personality of the millennium

markable performance in the negotiations seems to me to deny him millennial status."

No body disagreed with this assessment of the Palestinian leader and four of the bookies' favorites began to put some distance between themselves and the rest of the field. They were the great pan-Arab leaders Saladin and Nasser, plus two of the strongest-looking philosophers, al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldoun.

Hamadeh said that al-Ghazali had more influence but that Ibn Khaldoun was probably the more creative. "He was a 'universal man,'" agreed Mallat.

"But nobody read Ibn Khaldoun!" exclaimed Maluf. "Who the hell cares what intellectuals think! The more I think about this, the more I agree with myself: look at the region today, at the dominant ideas, who allowed Islam to flourish?"

"Islam happened to be the way it is because of al-Ghazali, but is this good?" asked Hamadeh. "What al-Ghazali wanted to do was put all the weight on theology. He said we should not focus only on reason."

"I agree Ibn Khaldoun was the most innovative thinker of the lot," conceded

Maluf. "If you want to look at someone who had almost no antecedent, then you have Ibn Khaldoun. But he was never influential! He was rediscovered by Toynbee."

Saladin and Nasser then made a bid to return to the race. "I wouldn't vote for Nasser," said Maluf, "apart from being an inspiration." "Nasser is loved in Lebanon," interjected Hamadeh, "but they don't like him so much in Egypt. They said 'You like him. You take him.'"

"I don't like Nasser," said Mallat, who preferred Saad Zaghlul, the founder of Egypt's nationalist *Wafd* party, "jailed and exiled by the British for his non-violent struggle against them."

Michael Young put up more of a defense of Nasser, crediting him with helping the Arabs to "affirm themselves vis-a-vis the outside world, particularly the west," to "push Egypt toward a more egalitarian social system," and "offer the Arabs a united political agenda."

The "various versions of political Islam" which followed Nasser, he argued, "appear to offer few solutions more durable."

"His record is largely a catalogue of fail-

ure," he admitted, "but his failure was momentarily tragic. In many ways momentous tragedies are a definition of greatness."

Young was less fulsome about Saladin. "To many he will remain an Arab hero, but I feel that his legacy has been conveniently reinterpreted this century to coincide with a modern view of anti-colonialism. I think he was a fine general and leader but if he is denied this modern view of him as a man who resisted the West, he becomes simply another soldier and dynast."

"If you want a soldier," said Mallat, "nobody can compete with him, but you don't get my vote. It's a shame nobody recorded the name of the inventor of air-conditioning ..."

It had become a two-horse race as they approached the final straight. Ibn Khaldoun was a length in front but al-Ghazali was still in the running.

Al-Ghazali, declared Maluf of the man who attacked the belief that humans could come to knowledge through reason, was "Islam's Thomas Aquinas."

No he wasn't, retorted Hamadeh, he was more like Islam's St. Augustine. "The method he used made him appear honest. He gave the most weight to theologians. His impact was negative – they burnt philosophy books," she said. "The one who was most influential (al-Ghazali) is not the one I most like. I'd give him an A for methods, a C for conclusions, and an F for impact."

"If one must come up with an Arab thinker," said Young, "which we must do given the contribution of Arab thought, then perhaps Ibn Khaldoun is a more obvious choice."

His choice, he said, was because of "the immediacy that makes him more accessible, his concept of the cycle of civilizations remains both relevant and fascinating to this day," and because he was an "innovator in modern historical methods."

Maluf agreed Ibn Khaldoun's "was a great achievement. He believed good science was empirical science. Nobody had asked 'how does history operate?'"

But, he added, "If we want to honor intellect, then Ibn Khaldoun. If we want to honor intellect and influence, then al-Ghazali." It seemed like a photo-finish between al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldoun. But there were some rank outsiders coming up on the rails. Asked for their final votes, Maluf voted for Saladin in first place, then al-Ghazali, followed by Ibn Saud. Ibn Saud?

"I can't defend this," Maluf admitted rather weakly, "but the creation of Saudi Arabia had an impact on the whole region." Hamadeh went for novelist Abdel-Rahman Munif as her second runner-up, al-Ghazali being piped to the post by Ibn Khaldoun. Mallat plumped for Ibn Khaldoun, followed by Umm Kulthoum and Naguib Mahfouz. Young chose Nasser, Muhammad Abdul and Ibn Khaldoun, in no particular order.

LEBANON'S MILLENNIUM
2000

The Daily Star, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 31, 1999

So the winner of The Daily Star's 1999 Millennial Stakes is Ibn Khaldoun, for services to history, philosophy and rationalism.