Arab Tribalism, Traditionalism and its Implications during the Early Annals of Islamic Polity

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Abstract

In all human civilisations, there is the concept of prejudice, which is one of the requirements for the survival of a society. One trait of the pre-Islamic Arabs that persisted fundamentally among the Arabs even after Islam is prejudice. Prejudice, which was pervasive among pre-Islamic Arabs, was crucial to post-Islamic Arab developments as well as to the happenings inside the Islamic world. The contribution made by the Arab tribes to the spread of Islam, the strengthening of Dar al-Islam [House of Islam], as well as in the Umayyad dynasty's reign and governance. Each confederation of tribes spearheaded the spread of Islam in a distinct direction, with the Bani Mudhar leading the way towards the east and the Bani Qahtan leading the way towards the west, due to the historical rivalry between the two groups. Tribal disputes were a means by which the Umayyads kept their hold on power; nevertheless, the Abbasids skillfully employed this strategy to establish a new dynasty. Muslim authors like Ibn Khaldun and Al-Maqrizi have discussed these divisions, highlighting their importance in the expansion of Islamic Empire. Arab tribes played a significant role in conquering territories, forming the first Muslim dynasty, and controlling power through tribal disputes. Tribal rivalry was a tactic employed by the Abbasids and Umayyads to share power; this was also the reason behind the Umayyads' downfall and the inception of the Abbasid revolt. This research aims to investigate the bias inside the Arab tribal system and its fallout and implications.

Key words: tribes, Bani Qahtan, Bani Mudhar, Marwanids, Abbasids

Introduction

Numerous writers have discussed the socio-economic distinctions over the ages. In his depictions of Arab society, for instance, Ibn Khaldun expounded on the significance of Arab tribe solidarity, or asabiyah, as a means of preserving their unity and resisting their adversaries. He demonstrated how asabiyah predated Islam and governed numerous inter personal and inter-tribal interactions among tribal members.

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Six social categories (tabaqat) make up Arab society, according to Al-Maqrizi. These include sha'b (peoples), qaba'il (tribes), ama'ir (kindred), butun (clans), afkhadh (lineage), and fasa'il (family groups).

Generally speaking, the tribes' structure and asabiyah played a significant role in the spread of Islam. Since the early stages of the Islamic empire, Arab tribes played a major role in conquering new territories during the caliphate of Hazrat Umar (RA). They were also involved in the initial fitnah against Hazrat Uthman (RA) and the beginnings of Amir Muawiyah's rebellion against Hazrat Ali. The Umayyads formed the first Muslim dynasty (661-750) and controlled power by exploiting tribal disputes.

The 'Abbasids used the same practice, quite skillfully, to replace the Umayyads. The traditional Arab tribal rivalries played a major role during this time. This paper analyses the role of the Arab tribes regarding power, administration of the empire during the Umayyad dynasty, as well as their involvement in the Umayyads and the origins of the 'Abbasid revolution.

The Arab Tribes: Jealousies, Rivalries and Disunity

During the early annals of Islamic history, the Arab tribes consisted of two major confederations: Northern tribes (Bani Mudhar, Bani Ma'add, Bani Qays, Bani Qays'Aylan, and Syrians) and Southern tribes (Bani Qahtan, Bani Kahlan, Bani Kalb, Bani Himyar, and Yemenites). These divisions have been in constant rivalry since the Arab's early history, primarily due to economic and political issues. The location of Southern tribes in northern territories and their settlements sparked disputes. Tribal conflicts in Arab history were often between confederations and their tribes, with some tribes uniting to defeat others. These rivalries were mainly due to economics and politics but also considered social, ethnic, and racial motives. The process of alliances between tribes, even between traditional enemies, has been explained by Muslim historians and Orientalists. Islam teaches a different relationship between individuals and Arab tribes with society than the Jahiliya period. 2

Islam preaches equality and fraternity among all individuals, tribal rivalries continued and much hate and fighting took place throughout the history of the Islamic empire. The process of making and breaking alliances took place in both the west and east of the empire and was a major reason for the success of the `Abbasid Movement to topple the Umayyad regime.³

The Arab tribes accepted Islam and participated eagerly in the Islamic expansion, which had religious, economic, and political reasons. The main cause for their eager participation was the share of booty, despite Shaban's opinion that the Bani Mudhar favoured a major expansion while the Bani Qahtan proposed a consolidation of the empire instead. The disputes between the Qahtan and the Qays tribes increased during the conquests for economic and political reasons. The initial wave of expansion directed toward Arabia's north and east was carried out mainly by the Northern tribes, especially Arabs from Makkah and the surrounding areas. These armies conquered Syria and Palestine after the Battle of Yarmuk (636 AD), Jerusalem surrendered (637

AD) to caliph Hazrat Umar (RA), and al Jazirah (Iraq) fell after the Battle of Qadisiyah (637AD).⁴

When the Southern tribes saw their opportunities for benefit, land, trade, and booty, they initiated another wave of expansion westward, mainly towards North Africa and al-Andalus, two regions they conquered with great benefit. However, neither the Northern nor the Southern tribes settled exclusively in the east or the west of Dar al-Islam. The expansion should not be understood only as originating from a religious motivation but also led the Arab tribes to undertake one of the largest expansions in history. ⁵

The Arabs of this time sought better economic conditions abroad, with the share of booty being an important incentive. The rapid expansion from Arabia to Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, Egypt, North Africa, and al-Andalus led to the adoption of existing Byzantine and Persian institutions. The Arabs transformed the basic division of spoils and territories from three categories to a major and better-organised one following the ancient Roman practice of the *limitanei*. The presence of armed tribal groups led to more inter-tribal rivalries, especially in Khurasan and Iraq.⁶

Religious and political issues were also important. Both tribal confederations claimed superiority but on different grounds. The Qahtan, due to the prestige of their southern kingdoms and culture before Islam, felt superior to their enemies. However, the origins of Islam and the preponderance of the Quraysh tribe gave the Northern tribes a more prestigious position among Arabs and all Muslims. The Quraysh tribe was proud of receiving the revelation and believed that the expected caliph would rise from among them. The importance of Arabic in maintaining Muslim unity and the ummah's integrity was also emphasised over the centuries. The Yemenites responded by describing the greatness of their past, making Qahtan a son of Prophet Hazrat Hud, and claiming that Qahtan was a direct descendant of Hazrat Isma'il, the "father of all Arabs."7During the Umayyad period, tribes played a significant political role in Islam, with their presence indicating either a prestigious position or severe social limitations. The caliphs' policies directly impacted tribal power and land ownership, with the Mudhar and Qahtan tribes improving their positions through royal support. However, local administration of certain parts of Khurasan was left to the Dahaqin, who managed to secure more privileges and better positions than the Qahtan tribes.8

Tribes were granted special privileges and leading positions, which were expected in return for better control of the empire's frontiers and tax collection. Major privileges granted included land, administrative positions, and command in military expeditions, booty allotments, patronage, tax exemption, and favouritism in trade, industry, and mining.

Favouritism and privileges helped develop a middle class, demonstrating social mobility. However, the opposite process occurred when middle-class people lost patrons or property, jeopardising their social status and forcing them to become part of the 'Ummah. Unfavoured tribes fought against the system, leading to tribal disputes. Land ownership brought many benefits to those in charge, but they used

peasants or hired others through agricultural contracts. The tribes were expected to respect the tradition of ihya' al-ard al-mayyitah, which involved land reclamation. Important political administrative positions often benefited from tax collection and personal benefits. ⁹

During the Islamic era, governors and army commanders held significant administrative power and often chose members of their tribes to rule smaller provinces and cities. Some tribes became extremely powerful, leading to rebellions against the caliph. Others were removed before they could challenge the caliph and establish independent states. Governors also profited from properties and luxurious houses built with public money and given to members of the Marwanid family. 10

Those chosen by the caliph or his representatives to lead military expeditions for new conquests also benefited greatly. The promise of sharing the booty among participants was an incentive for Arab tribes to enroll in these campaigns. Both the Northern and Southern tribes conducted and benefited from Islam's expansion and conquests, with the Qays tribes favouring new expansionist wars for economic benefits. The Southern tribes shared projects for assimilation with the Shu`ubiyah, while the Yemenites also participated in expansionist wars.

Despite the large number of Arabs moving to Iraq, Khurasan, North Africa, and al-Andalus, they were always a minority population among local Persians, Berbers, or Visigoths. Arab military leaders had to enroll and organise armies of local people, but the mawali were not treated as equals of Arab Muslims, receiving a smaller share of the booty. This unjust treatment led to mawali revolts in the east and west, particularly in North Africa and al-Andalus (Muslim Spain).¹¹

The Umayyad family faced power rivalry, leading to division among ruling elites and ultimately fracturing the empire. The Umayyads lost tribal vigor and were replaced by a rival group. Modern scholars argue that internal family conflict and tribal conflict were intertwined, with the royal family's role shaping events. Most tribal conflicts emerged due to Umayyad family support. ¹² According, **Nazeer Ahmed:**

"The Omayyads fell from grace because they had departed from the *Tawhidic* civilization as it was founded by the Prophet and practiced by the first four Caliphs. The Omayyads were able soldiers, some were consummate politicians (Muawiya, Waleed I), one was pious and noble (Omar bin Abdul Aziz) but most were ruthless, impious and cruel". ¹³He further said that:

"The Omayyads became a dynasty just like other dynasties in Asia or Europe with their focus on riches and power. The rulers became tax collectors so that they could sustain their palaces in Damascus. They lost their spiritual claim to leadership. Where faith is weak, a civilization declines. When spirituality is lost, political rule must of necessity be sustained at the point of the blade. This is what happened with the Omayyads".

The Umayyads gave the Northern tribes many privileges, such as tax exemption, property ownership, and positions of authority and leadership, which infuriated the Qahtan. The people of the South were against both the Mudhar and the Umayyads and battled vigorously against their foes in Iraq and Khurasan. As a result, the Abbasids

came to power and the Umayyads fell. It is crucial to remember that the Abbasids came to power for a variety of reasons, including the involvement of the mawali and other factions, in addition to the support of the Southern tribes.

The Abbasid revolution in the Islamic empire centred on conflicts between tribes from the North and the South. The first three Umayyad caliphs, Amir Mu'awiyah, Yazid, and Mu'awiyah II, supported the Southern tribes, particularly the Bani Azd families who supported Hazrat Talha bin Ubaidullah and Hazrat Zubayr bin al Awwam against Hazrat Ali (RA). However, no fighting occurred in Jazirah or Syria due to fear of the caliph and his tight administration. The Mudhar-Qahtan rivalry was reactivated in these areas after Amir Mu'awiyah's death, especially under Yazid. Marwan I, who succeeded Mu'awiyah ibn Yazid, started the Marwanid Umayyad dynasty, which relied on the Qahtan tribes for support. The inter-tribal rivalries in Iraq and Syria were partly due to economic and political reasons. The Marwanids tried to balance tribal leaders and governors through a centralised system of government and established an army responsible for centralisation, defence, and administration. ¹⁵

During the Marwanid period, the caliphs relied on military men as governors, such as al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, who became the architect of `Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan's military, political, and economic reforms. The Marwanids introduced a specific Muslim coinage in their lands, replacing the old Sasanid and Byzantine coins. This gave the Marwanid Umayyad dynasty grand efficient control of the empire. ¹⁶

Shaban points out that the war policy served as the foundation for the tribal disputes. Qays supported growth, but Yemenis opposed the expansionist strategy and called for equal rights for Mawali and their integration with the local community. ¹⁷

Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (685AD-705AD) supported and relied on the Qays tribal confederation, especially through the support he gave the Thaqafi tribe by appointing al-Hajjaj governor-general of Iraq. He consolidated the Qays' power in Iraq and Khurasan, but faced numerous struggles against him. To quell the Khawarij revolts, Syrian forces were sent to Iraq.

Al-Hajjaj tried to balance the Arab tribal disputes and power struggles, but in the long run, he favoured the Qays' power. Qutaybah ibn Muslim, a Qaysite from the weak Bahilah clan, governed Khurasan for 10 years (705 AD-715 AD) and favoured the military forward policy. He conquered important cities that contributed to Islam's greatness, such as Samarqand, Bukhara, Paykand, and Khwarizm.¹⁸

Al-Walid I's succession to power had a direct impact upon Khurasan and the administration of Central Asia. Al-Walid I was careful not to irritate the Kalbis in those campaigns organised by Qutaybah ibn Muslim, and his army deserted and killed him in 715 AD. Tribal rivalries broke out again for the same old economic and political reasons even before al-Hajjaj dismissed Yazid ibn al-Muhallab, the Azd governor of Khurasan, and replaced him with Qutaybah ibn Muslim.¹⁹

These inter-tribal problems were exacerbated by the Marwanids' centralisation plans and the influence of the Persian Empire. The Marwanids' appropriation and division of land among their family members and tribal allies exacerbated inter-tribal problems, particularly among the Southern tribes. This policy, developed in the practice of sawafi, angered the Southern tribes, who were excluded from public positions and land distribution projects. The support of al-Hajjaj over the mawali further aggravated these issues, leading to the rebellion against the Umayyads. The mawali were ready to revolt or join a rebellion against the Umayyads to stop heavy taxation, discrimination, and tyrannical rulings. ²⁰

The revolt gained support from various social and ethnic groups, with the major supporters being the Southern tribes and the mawali. The revolt also had religious overtones, with the rebels even calling al-Hajjaj "the enemy of God." The revolt was supported by most religious people, the ulama, and the Qur'an readers, except for al-Hasan al-Basri.

The role of the mawali was also significant, as they were not fairly treated as new converts due to general Umayyad policy. The Persian Dahaqin also supported the rebellion, but faced serious consequences after the revolt was suppressed. Other rebellions throughout Muslim history had similar causes, with their appeals for change and equality in Muslim society being important aspirations.²¹

The Umayyad dynasty favoured the Northerners over the Southerners, as evidenced by Yazid ibn al-Muhallab's revolt in 720 AD against Yazid II. This revolt was significant due to its popularity and potential precursor to the 'Abbasid revolution. Ibn al-Muhallab gained support from both the Northern and Southern tribes, but also gained more support from the Southern tribes. His ideology, appeals to religion, and freedom from Umayyad control also influenced his aspirations for Iraq and possibly Khurasan.²² The Dahaqin supported Ibn al-Ash'ath's revolt, possibly in hopes of recapturing their previous position as tax collectors. The revolt had a catastrophic end when he faced the Umayyad army. However, the 'Abbasids took several traditions developed after this revolt, such as repudiating the Umayyads and calling himself "Qahtani."

Inter-tribal fighting during the Umayyad period increased during the last 25 to 30 years of their rule, as caliphs like Hisham and Marwan II openly relied on the Mudhar. The support of a particular tribal confederation was crucial to the caliph's ability to stay in power. The disputes between the Northern and Southern tribal divisions were exploited by the 'Abbasids, who were aware of the Yeminites' power in Khurasan and their enmity toward the Mudhar and the Umayyads.²⁴

Khurasan was essential to the 'Abbasids' propaganda and army organisation, as its people already accepted and supported them. Many Yemenites were recruited by the Abbasid in army, and these troops were skilled and well-versed in combat. In summary, the Umayyad dynasty's resistance to the Umayyads was influenced by intertribal rivalries and opposition to Umayyad rule. Zaydan believed that factionalism was the primary cause of the Umayyads' downfall. The succeeding Umayyad monarchs were unable to preserve the balance between Yemen's and Qays' power structures. Yemenis, who had previously been the Umayyads' principal military power, disassociated themselves they freed themselves from Umayyad authority and aided those who opposed the Umayyads.²⁵

The 'Abbasids' secret propaganda aimed to attract the Qahtan tribes while being gentle to the Qays. They sought Yemenite support first, but were open to obtaining Mudar's help as well. In the early stages of the 'Abbasid propaganda, religion was the strongest call to support the movement, even stronger than tribal solidarity. The Southern tribes joined the 'Abbasid revolution in the hope that the new government would improve their political and social status. The 'Abbasids were skilled in maneuvering inter-tribal disputes for their interests and objectives.²⁶

The Umayyads tried all possible ways to control power and gain legitimacy. They convinced many Muslims that the Umayyads were the Holy Prophet's (SAW) only relatives, even before they started their propaganda. For the 'Abbasids, their claims of legitimacy had two levels: first, they were descendants of the Holy Prophet's family (al ridha min al e Muhammad (SAW)) and second, the political activism and practices of the Shi'ite Zayd ibn 'Ali, the great-grandson of 'Hazrat Ali and Hazrat Fatimah, had led a revolt in 740 AD against the Umayyads.

Khorasan was seething with discontent. The legacy of Umayyad excesses had created extreme bitterness among the local population. Unfair taxation had fostered dislike of the Arabs among the Persians. The Arabs were divided among themselves along tribal lines. Capable men and scholars were either silenced by the Umayyads or they withdrew from public life. In this atmosphere, Abbasid propaganda for the rights of the Hashemites and of *Ahl-al Bait* found an extremely positive reception. The Alavites supported the Abbasids as the best opportunity to overthrow the hated Umayyads and perhaps establish the rule of the house of Ali (RA) and Fatima(RA). The common man had toiled too long under the oppressive maltreatment of Omayyad officials and prayed for deliverance.²⁷

The Umayyad and Abbasid Dynasties through the Lens of Historians The Umayyad

Edward Gibbon, "The West esteemed the caliphs of Cordova as the most potent sovereigns of Europe; their splendid court became the asylum of the intellect and the sciences; their numerous schools were frequented by the ingenious youth of all nations; and Cordova acquired the proud appellation of the Athens of the West." (The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire)

Ibn Khaldun, "The Umayyad dynasty was like a fruitful tree whose roots were established in firm soil, whose branches rose high in the sky, and whose shade encompassed the world." (Muqaddimah)

Muhammad al-Makki, Andalusian scholar: "Under their [Umayyad] rule, knowledge and wisdom increased, the sciences flourished, and the poets excelled." (Qudwat al-Muqtataf fi Zakhair al-Khulafa wa-Muluk al-Tawaf).

Al-Tabari, "They [Umayyads] were mighty kings, just and generous, but at times harsh and oppressive." (Tarikh e Tabari)

Al-Ya'qubi, "Their [Umayyad] caliphate was one of splendor and power, but also of internal conflicts and rebellions." (Tarikh al-Ya'qubi)

Ibn Hazm, Andalusian polymath: "The Umayyads were tyrannical and unjust rulers who favored their own tribe and oppressed others." (Risalat fi al-Fitna al-Andalusiyya) al-Qurtubi,

The Abbasids

Edward Gibbon: "The age of the Abbassides, for the three centuries after Mohammed, [The Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW] might have rivalled the brilliant ages of Greece and Rome." (The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire)

Al-Masudi, "Under the Abbasids, knowledge and wisdom grew, learning flourished, and the sciences prospered... their era was one of justice and generosity." (Muruj al-Dhahabi wa Majma'a al-Bahrain)

Al-Farabi: "The Abbasid caliphs were patrons of philosophy, logic, and astronomy, their libraries contained the wisdom of the world, and their courts attracted the greatest scholars of their time." (Kitab al-Musiqia)

Al-Tabari: "The Abbasid dynasty saw great wealth and cultural achievements, but also internal conflicts, rebellions, and periods of decline." (Tarikh e Tabari)

Ibn Khaldun: "Their [Abbasid] rule fluctuated between strength and weakness, justice and injustice, progress and stagnation... a reflection of the complexities of human history." (Al- Muqaddimah)

Al-Biruni: "Later Abbasid caliphs became weak and indulgent, neglecting the affairs of state and indulging in lavish luxuries while the common people suffered." (Kitab al-Hind) Ibn Hazm, Andalusian polymath: "The Abbasids became preoccupied with courtly intrigues and religious disputes, forgetting the true principles of Islam and neglecting the needs of their people." (Risalat fi al-Fitna al-Andalusiyya)

Conclusion

Pre-Islamic Arab society was marked by tribal divisions and rivalries, with two confederations: the Bani Qahtan (Southerners) and the Bani Mudhar (Northerners). Both confederations contested water, land, and trade routes. Despite their conversion to Islam, their feuds persisted, and were transported to various regions. The Mudhar confederation aimed to expand Islam, while the Qahtan directed Muslim armies toward the West. The Umayyads exploited tribal disputes to consolidate power and gain territory. The 'Abbasids, skilled in attracting Mudhar tribes, eventually drove the Umayyads from power and brought a new dynasty to rule.

These fissures, divisions and dichotomy resulted some times in the form of

competition, contentedness and the spirit of taking lead in the political and administrative spheres, while on the other occasion resulted in the political turmoil, tension and mayhem. The division based on tribalism and traditionalism firstly led the Umayyads landing into the political corridors and later on history repeated itself by throwing out the Umayyads out of political arena by the Abassids using the same tactics which ultimately saw the same fate like their predecessors.

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