

Introduction

Historical Background – Umayyad Rule

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the conditions that led to the emergence of the sects that form the subject of this study, it is necessary to examine briefly the nature of Umayyad rule in Iraq and especially the problems at Kufa and its surroundings. Beginning with the reign of the Umayyad dynastic founder, Mu`āwīya ibn Abī Sufyan, the ruling circles in Damascus experienced hostility and intransigence on the part of many of the inhabitants of Iraq. Anti-Umayyad outbreaks became a permanent feature of the Iraqi milieu. These movements of protest stemmed from problems of assimilation with non-Arabs, religious conflicts, and social stratification and polarization in Kufa. The economic and social grievances associated with stratification were particularly bitter and troublesome for those seeking to govern Iraq. It was inevitable that the situation resulting from prolonged struggle would, in the long run, serve only to increase the obstinacy of the Iraqis, on the one hand, and the severity of the Umayyad rulers, on the other.

Since the publication of M. A. Shaban's *Islamic History A.D. 600–750 (A. H. 132): A New Interpretation*, scholars of early Islamic history have begun to revise their views of one of the most important features of early Iraqi history: tribal rivalries among the Arabs living in that region. Earlier scholars such as Julius Wellhausen, Ignaz Goldziher, and others argued that early Muslim history,

especially in Iraq, was shaped to a great extent by rivalry between North Arabs, Qaysites, and Southern Arabs, known in the sources as Yamanis. According to this line of reasoning, the Umayyad dynasty became embroiled in a blood dispute going all the way back into pre-Islamic days. Although the sympathies of the dynasty shifted according to ruler, essentially the Umayyads gradually came to be looked upon, particularly in Iraq, as partisans of the Mudar branch of North Arabs and thereby alienated for good the Rabi`a branch of the North Arabs, as well as the South Arabs. As Shaban has pointed out, what seems to have been at work was a difference between “Qaysites” and “Yamanites” over the policy to be followed with regard to the role of non-Arab Muslims in the Islamic state. The Qaysites and the Umayyads apparently fought against a policy of assimilating and conciliating non-Arabs, whereas the Yamanites, in the interest of settled life and trade, opted for a policy of assimilation and cooperation. When the Umayyads sought to maintain Arab hegemony and non-assimilation, the Rabi`a and the Yaman adopted a policy of opposition and enmity toward the ruling dynasty.¹

More recently, Patricia Crone, in an interesting rebuttal of Shaban’s thesis, argues that the Qays-Yaman conflict did not result from a conflict between two political parties bearing those names. She maintains, rather, that the Qays-Yaman antagonism was primarily a military phenomenon involving rivalries for positions within the provinces. Most importantly, and, in some respects, reflective of the older pre-Shaban arguments, she suggests that the rivalry took the form of *‘asabiyya*, in other words, the involved parties conceived of their identities as lineage-based.²

¹ M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History A.D. 600–750 (A. H. 132): A New Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1971), 120–124, 128–130.

² Patricia Crone, “Were the Qays and Yemen of the Umayyad Period Political Parties?” *Der Islam*, 71 (1994), 1–57.

Whatever the truth of the matter, the evidence forthcoming with respect to the four sects considered in this book clearly shows that both Arabs and non-Arab Muslims, or *Mawālī*, fought side by side in these anti-Umayyad efforts. Whether this reflected a desire for Arab and non-Arab assimilation is open to question. Factors of political and economic justice, factional rivalries, and religious conviction all undoubtedly played a major role in this cooperation.

Similar factors may have been at work in the rise of religious opposition groups, which troubled the Umayyads from the time of their accession to power. The Kharijites, for instance, engaged in anti-government activities for the duration of Umayyad rule. Their agitation was especially intense in Iraq at the time of the early Umayyad caliphs. From the beginning of Mu'āwīya's reign in 661 down to the year 680, there were sixteen Kharijite revolts, most of them around Basra or Kufa.³ The Kharijite emphasis doctrinally, as is well known, was upon the piety and the deeds of the individual, leadership of the religious community being the prerogative of the most pious and egalitarian member of that community. They were the uncompromising foes of Umayyad rule, which in their way of thinking consisted of the centralized control of governing power by a secular hereditary ruler.

In addition to the Kharijite opposition, the Shī'ites, partisans of 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib and his descendants, were quite active in the anti-Umayyad movements. This party was particularly strong in Iraq, primarily in the city of Kufa and its hinterland. Since this Shī'ite activity constitutes the focal point of the present study, further remarks will be reserved for the following chapters. Here it is sufficient to note that the proto-Shī'ites formed another active opposition movement to Umayyad rule.

³ W. Montgomery Watt, "Kharijite Thought in the Umayyad Period," *Islam*, XXXVI (1961), 216–217.

The social and economic grievances of at least some non-Arab Muslims, the *Mawālī*, served to add these people to the ranks of the anti-Umayyad movements. In upholding a policy of non-assimilation, the Umayyads not only condoned discrimination against non-Arabs; a number of the caliphs and their entourages actively engaged in it. The *Mawālī*, for example, received harsh treatment at the hands of the Umayyad governor al-Hajjāj ibn Yūsuf. He is known to have forced converts who had moved to the cities to return to their lands and to pay the *Jizya* (head tax), which was in theory imposed only upon non-Muslims.⁴ His severe treatment of those *Mawālī* who had fought on the side of 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn al-Ash'ath stands in glaring contrast to his more generous attitude toward certain Arabs who had also followed Ibn al-Ash'ath.⁵ Not all *Mawālī* flocked to the anti-Umayyad cause, but enough did so that Shi'ism after 685 begins to take on a definite *Mawālī* coloration, as even the most recent research tends to confirm. Further information about the situation of the *Mawālī* will be given in Chapter 6. We may simply note here their presence among the most bitter opponents of the Damascene regime.

Iraqi anti-Umayyad feeling also appears to have been a reflection of anti-Syrian regional feeling. As Wellhausen pointed out years ago, the Iraqis resented the transfer of the capital from

⁴ Surprisingly enough, given his importance, we possess no recent study of the career of al-Hajjāj in a European language. There is the considerably dated work of Jean Perier, *Vie d'al-Hadjdjadj Ibn Yousof s'après les Sources Arabes* (Paris, 1904), 262–263. More recently and importantly, we have the numerous references to al-Hajjāj included in the following: 'Abd al-Ameer 'Abd Dixon, *The Umayyad Caliphate 65–86/684–705 (A Political Study)* (London, 1971); G. R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam – The Umayyad Caliphate A.D. 661–750* (Carbondale, Ill., 1987), esp. 70; A. Dietrich, “al-Hadjdjadj B. Yūsuf B. al-Hakam B. 'Akil al-Thakafī, Abū Muhammad,” in *Encyclopædia of Islam*, III (2nd ed., Leiden, 1971), 39–43.

⁵ For a detailed treatment of the Ibn al-Ash'ath rebellion, see Redwan Sayed, *Die Revolte des Ibn al-As'at und die Koranleser* (Freiburg, 1977); note especially 276–369. For the *Mawālī* issue, see Hawting, *First Dynasty*, 69–70. One may also consult L. Vecchia Vaglieri, “Ibn al-Ash'ath,” *E.I.2*, III (Leiden, 1971), 719.

Kufa to Damascus with the resulting loss of status and power for the Iraqi city and its inhabitants. The severity of the Umayyad governors in Iraq and the introduction of Syrian garrisons into that region are perhaps the clearest proof of Iraqi resistance to Syrian centralized rule. Strong measures were necessary in order to control the Iraqis' striving for autonomy. This fierce regional sentiment was to find full expression in the revolt of Yazīd ibn al-Muhallab. Francesco Gabrieli has pointed out that it was the Muhallabid attempt to intertwine their personal fortunes with Iraqi regional feeling that caused the Umayyads to exterminate this important family. He goes on to say that it is that attempted identification of interests that gives the Muhallabid revolt its historical significance. Had it been merely a matter of family ambition, he argues, the revolt would not have been of such importance.⁶ Iraqi anti-Syrian feeling may very well have had some place in the motives of those Arabs who joined the groups to be examined in the subsequent chapters.

In view of the Iraqi attitude toward the Umayyad government, it is not surprising that the latter should have entrusted the governorship of an unruly province to individuals of a rather stern and forceful nature. It was obvious to the central government that Iraq, for strategic and economic reasons, had to be ruled firmly. This posed a considerable dilemma for the Umayyads, however. The problem was to strike a balance between the necessary firmness and undue severity, which could only reinforce discontent. In several cases the harsh policies of the Umayyad governors exacerbated the situation and intensified anti-Umayyad feeling and activity.

Some governors were able to find the right mix between persuasion and power. Ziyād ibn Abīhī, Mu'āwiya's adopted brother

⁶ Francesco Gabrieli, "La Rivolta dei Muhallabiti nel Iraq e il nuovo Baladuri," *Atti della Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. Rendiconti: Classe Scienze Morali, Storiche e Filologiche*, Ser. VI, Vol. XIV (1938), 235.

and his governor of Iraq, ruled the province with strength but, at the same time, managed to avoid unnecessary violence. In order to establish order in Basra, he initiated a curfew and had violators summarily executed.⁷ On the other hand, he did not seek to subdue the tribes by mass executions. His solution to tribal unruliness was to locate different tribes in one quarter, to name a chieftain to head each of these quarters, and to make him responsible for their good behavior.⁸ He was able to establish security in his domains without resorting to extreme harshness. The same thing applies to the governorate of Khālid ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Qasrī. He was one of the most able and, simultaneously, one of the most moderate governors of Iraq. It is interesting to note that the revolt of al-Mughīra ibn Sa'īd and Bayān ibn Sam'ān took place during Khālid's relatively benign rule.

Al-Hajjāj ibn Yūsuf, Umayyad governor of Iraq from 695 to 714, is perhaps the best example of the authoritarian, overly severe official. Whereas it is true that he was able to maintain Umayyad control over Iraq, it is also true that his methods raised enemies for the Umayyad dynasty. His implacability, which has become proverbial among the Arabs, was no doubt responsible for many anti-government outbursts, the most serious of which was that of Ibn al-Ash'ath. His treatment of the *Mawālī* intensified the hatred of many of them for the Syrian dynasty and its representatives. A clear indication of this is to be found in the presence in the ranks of Ibn al-Ash'ath's rebel force of a large number of Persian *Mawālī*.⁹ Whereas it is necessary to allow for the prejudice of the sources, there can be no doubt that al-Hajjāj, although an able and dedicated official, was excessively stringent in the discharge of his official duties.

⁷ Henri Lammens, "Ziād ibn Abihī, vice-roi de l'Iraq," *RSO*, IV (1911–1912), 41–42.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 658–659.

⁹ Hawting, *First Dynasty*, 69–70; Sayed, *Die Revolte*, Ch. 5 passim; Perier, *al-Hadjjadj ibn Yousof*, 201.

Another Umayyad governor who seems to have done much to heighten anti-government feeling in Iraq was Yūsuf ibn 'Umar. During his term in office, he acquired the general reputation of a bloodthirsty tyrant.¹⁰ Certainly his senseless vengeance against Khālīd al-Qasrī did much to crystallize anti-Umayyad feeling among the Yamanite Arabs who were supporters or associates of Khālīd in Iraq and Syria. As will be seen, it was during his rule that Abū Mansūr al-'Ijli and the Mansūriyya appeared in Iraq.

Finally, it must be stressed that the emergence of the four sects was a reflection mainly of problems at Kufa that had arisen before the first half of the eighth century. There was by the 730s extreme social fragmentation at Kufa among the many tribal groups. There was an early end to significant territorial expansion by the Kufan army, which meant that there were few rewards from booty or the administration of new territory after 650 compared to Basra, Syria, or Egypt. The pressures were transferred to the *Sawād* of Kufa and its peasants, where the tax base was insufficient to support the military population at Kufa, and this was in turn aggravated by its alienation as land grants favored individuals beginning in the time of 'Uthmān and continuing into the Marwānid period. By the time of Mu'āwiya, the Arab population of Kufa was polarized and stratified, and the emergence of the Kharijites and the Shī'ites at least partially resulted from internal social conflicts in that city. By the early eighth century, the Kufans were largely demilitarized as well as stratified. The *Ashrāf* (Islamic notables) had been replaced by a new elite of Marwānid princes and protégés, who monopolized the rewards of administration and economic development in Iraq. Those who could escape migrated from Kufa to find new economic opportunities in western Iran. It is not, therefore, surprising to find disenchanted

¹⁰ K. V. Zettersteen, "Yūsuf ibn Omar," in *E.I.*, III (Leiden, 1934), 1177.

Arabs and *Mawālī* engaging in common anti-regime activities by that time. As one scholar has written:

Such polarization also enhanced the attraction of religious piety as an alternative source of status and to express disapproval of worldly success. The piety of the Khawarij was both a matter of religious status and justification for revolt while the Messianic elite of the Kaysāniyya Shī'a invented their own alternate status.¹¹

For all of the preceding reasons, then, the Umayyad rulers faced almost constant challenges in the Iraqi provinces. Individuals and groups resisting the Damascene dynasty were never lacking. The groups to which this study is devoted were only a small portion of the rebellious movements that appeared between 661 and 750. Although the movement that finally overturned the Umayyads (the 'Abbāsids) began in the eastern provinces, it is clear that the forces culminating in this revolt had their ultimate origins in turbulent Iraq.¹²

¹¹ Quoted with the permission of the author from Michael G. Morony, "Status and Stratification in the Iraqi Amsar" (Paper presented to the Thirteenth Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association at Salt Lake City, Utah, on November 10, 1979.). Further details were provided to me in a personal communication from Professor Morony, and I am grateful to him for this information. For an exhaustive treatment of these social issues in Iraq, see his study, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, cited previously.

¹² For the 'Abbasid revolution and its Iraqi element, see the study of Moshe Sharon, *Black Banners from the East. The Establishment of the 'Abbasid State – Incubation of a Revolt* (Jerusalem, 1983), *passim*. Now one should consult Salah Said Agha, *The Revolution Which Toppled the Umayyads: Neither Arab Nor Abbasid* (Leiden, 2005).

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Earlier Movements

In view of the emphasis placed upon sectarian or group structure in this study, the most logical starting point is an examination of the earliest Shī'ite or proto-Shī'ite group, known as the Saba'iyya, whose name comes from its founder, one 'Abd Allāh ibn Saba', a contemporary of 'Uthmān and 'Alī. There has been much disagreement and uncertainty surrounding the life of this individual and the nature of the movement named for him. Although there has been some doubt as to whether Ibn Saba' ever existed, information found in reliable sources seems to indicate his presence among the partisans of 'Alī.¹ Still one of the best presentations of the source materials for the activities and beliefs of Ibn Saba' and his followers, as well as a detailed and skillful analysis of these materials, is the study of Israel Friedlaender, entitled "'Abd Allāh ibn Saba', der Begründer der Shī'a, und sein Jüdischer Ursprung."² Although some of Friedlaender's views require modification, perhaps, his general conclusions concerning the activities and beliefs of Ibn Saba' and the Saba'iyya seem to be

¹ Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr ibn Bahr al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, II (Cairo, 1949), part III, 81; G. Levi della Vida, "Il Califato di 'Alī secondo il Kitāb Ansab al-Asraf di al-Baladuri," *RSO*, IV (1914–1915), 495.

² Israel Friedlaender, "'Abdallah b. Saba', der Begründer der Shi'a, und sein jüdischer Ursprung," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, XXIII (1909), 296–327, II XIV (1910), 1–46.

substantially correct. The significant result of Friedlaender's work is that it demonstrates in a rather conclusive manner that Ibn Saba' and the Saba'iyya did, in fact, exist, at least from the time of 'Alī, and that they came to entertain religious beliefs, at least some of which were adhered to by the groups that are the subject of this study. The reliability of Friedlaender's study has been attested to by Sabatino Moscati, who made substantial use of it in his treatment of the Saba'iyya in an article about the early Shī'a.³ More recently, Halm has discussed the Saba'iyya issue, especially with emphasis upon the religious facets of Ibn Saba's movement.⁴ The following discussion, therefore, will be derived largely from the works of Friedlaender and Halm, with supplementary materials from other sources introduced where necessary.

Traditionally 'Abd Allāh ibn Saba' is said to have been a converted Jew from the Yaman.⁵ Based upon his research, G. Levi Della Vida has denied this, maintaining that Ibn Saba' was an Arab. His name, according to this account, was 'Abd Allāh ibn Wahb al-Hamdāni.⁶ Friedlaender advances the hypothesis that he was the son of an Ethiopian Falasha woman, adducing this from the information that he is sometimes called Ibn as-Sawda.⁷ The heresiographer al-Baghdādī maintains that Ibn Saba' and Ibn as-Sawda were two different individuals.⁸ This seems to be the only source to make such a distinction, however. It is quite possible that the imputation of Jewish ancestry to Ibn Saba' on

³ Sabatino Moscati, "Antica Sī'a," 256.

⁴ Halm, *Islamische Gnosis*, 33–42.

⁵ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, "'Abdallāh ibn Saba'," in *E.I.*, I (2nd ed., Leiden, 1960), 51.

⁶ Levi della Vida, "Califfato di 'Alī," 495.

⁷ Friedlaender, "'Abdallah b. Saba'," XXIV, 22–31. This hypothesis is unlikely. The woman might just as easily have been an East African slave. Halm has referred to this issue, but his conclusions regarding Friedlaender's "hypothesis" are unclear. Halm, *Islamische Gnosis*, 41–42.

⁸ 'Abd al-Qāhir ibn Tāhir ibn Muhammad al-Baghdādī, *Moslem Schisms and Sects (al-Fark bain al-Firak)*, trans. A. S. Halkin (Tel Aviv, 1935), 42–43.