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Sectarian Conflict and Its Impact on the Stability of the Umayyad State: An Analytical Study of the Relationship Between Power and Islamic Sects (41-132 AH / 661-750 AD)

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the nature of sectarian conflict and its impact on the stability of the Umayyad State during the period (41-132 AH / 661-750 AD). The study focuses on examining the relationship between Umayyad authority and major Islamic sects, particularly the Kharijites and Shia, and how these conflicts contributed to weakening the state and ultimately led to its fall. The study employs a historical analytical methodology to examine the events, policies, and revolts that shaped this critical period of Islamic history. The findings indicate that sectarian conflict, alongside tribal prejudice and discrimination against the Mawali, played a pivotal role in destabilizing the Umayyad state and paving the way for the Abbasid revolution. The study concludes that the Umayyads' failure to manage sectarian and ethnic diversity within the state was among the most important factors that led to its collapse.

Keywords: Umayyad Caliphate, Sectarian Conflict, Kharijites, Shia, Mawali, Abbasid Revolution, Political Stability, Islamic Sects

المخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل طبيعة الصراع المذهبي وأثره في استقرار الدولة الأموية خلال الفترة (41-132هـ / 661-750م). تركز الدراسة على فحص العلاقة بين السلطة الأموية والفرق الإسلامية الرئيسية، وخاصة الخوارج والشيعة، وكيف ساهمت هذه الصراعات في إضعاف الدولة وسقوطها في النهاية. تستخدم الدراسة المنهج التاريخي التحليلي لفحص الأحداث والسياسات والثورات التي شكلت هذه الفترة الحرجة من التاريخ الإسلامي. تشير النتائج إلى أن الصراع المذهبي، إلى جانب العصبية القبلية والتمييز ضد الموالي، لعب دوراً محورياً في زعزعة استقرار الدولة الأموية وتمهيد الطريق للثورة العباسية. تخلص الدراسة إلى أن فشل الأمويين في إدارة التنوع المذهبي والعرقي داخل الدولة كان من أهم العوامل التي أدت إلى انهيارها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الدولة الأموية، الصراع المذهبي، الخوارج، الشيعة، الموالي، الثورة العباسية، الاستقرار السياسي، الفرق الإسلامية

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Introduction

The exploration of sectarian conflict and its implications for the stability of the Umayyad State during the early Islamic period (41–132 AH / 661–750 AD) necessitates a thorough examination of the complex interplay between power dynamics and sectarian identities. The literature on this subject reveals a multifaceted landscape where historical grievances, political maneuvers, and social tensions converge.

Antosh (2016) provides a foundational understanding of sectarian violence, emphasizing that the roots of such conflicts extend beyond mere religious and ethnic differences. Her qualitative analysis highlights the competition for power and survival as fundamental human instincts that drive groups toward violent confrontations. This perspective is critical for grasping the broader processes influencing sectarian conflicts, suggesting that the Umayyad era was characterized by similar power struggles that transcended sectarian lines. (R. Antosh, 2016)

Building on this notion, Nissaraly (2017) delves into the historical context of sectarian tensions, particularly focusing on the Sunni-Shia divide that has its origins in the aftermath of Prophet Muhammad's death. By analyzing the events surrounding the tragedy of Karbala and the political strategies employed by figures like al-Zarqawi, Nissaraly illustrates how historical narratives and grievances have been manipulated to exacerbate sectarian divisions. This manipulation has profound implications for the political landscape, particularly in how Sunni and Shia identities have been mobilized in the quest for power. (Nissaraly, 2017)

O'Driscoll (2018) further contextualizes these dynamics within the contemporary landscape of Iraq, identifying emerging trends that echo the historical sectarian conflicts of the Umayyad period. His synthesis of recent conflicts highlights the role of various actors, including militias and governmental forces, in perpetuating sectarian strife. The competition for resources, exacerbated by environmental degradation, reflects a continuity of conflict that can be traced back to the early Islamic state, where similar struggles for power and survival were prevalent. (O'Driscoll, 2018)

In a more recent analysis, Valbjorn and Hinnebusch (2019) discuss the instrumentalization of sectarian identities by political actors, particularly in the context of Arab authoritarianism. They argue that sectarianism has been weaponized as a political tool, allowing regimes to maintain control by exploiting divisions among sects. This perspective invites a reevaluation of the Umayyad State's strategies in managing sectarian identities, suggesting that similar tactics may have been employed to ensure political stability amidst a fractured society. (Valbjorn & Hinnebusch, 2019)

Mabon (2019) offers a critical lens on the concept of sectarianization, proposing a framework for desectarianization that acknowledges the long-term challenges of overcoming entrenched sectarian identities. His discussion of geopolitical factors and the role of regional rivalries in shaping sectarian dynamics underscores the complexity of sectarian relations, which can be traced back to the foundational conflicts of the Umayyad period. This analysis suggests that understanding the historical context of sectarianism is essential for developing strategies aimed at fostering peace and stability in divided societies. (Mabon, 2019)

Together, these articles weave a narrative that illustrates the historical and contemporary significance of sectarian conflict in shaping the political landscape of the Umayyad State. They underscore the enduring nature of sectarian identities and the critical need for nuanced approaches to address the complexities inherent in sectarian relations.

The Umayyad Caliphate (41–132 AH / 661–750 AD) represents one of the most significant yet turbulent periods in Islamic history. Established by Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan following the assassination of Ali ibn Abi Talib and the subsequent abdication of al-Hasan ibn Ali, the Umayyad state marked the transition from the elective system of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs to hereditary monarchy (Wellhausen, 1958). While the Umayyads achieved remarkable territorial expansion, extending Islamic rule from the Iberian Peninsula to Central Asia, their reign was characterized by persistent internal conflicts that ultimately led to their downfall.

The establishment of the Umayyad state coincided with the emergence of distinct Islamic sects, each challenging the legitimacy of Umayyad rule on religious and political grounds. The Kharijites, who had initially supported Ali ibn Abi Talib before turning against him, rejected the very foundation of Umayyad authority (Al-Tabari, 915). Similarly, the Shia maintained that legitimate rule belonged exclusively to the descendants of Ali ibn Abi Talib, viewing the Umayyads as usurpers of rightful authority (Al-Mas'udi, 947).

This study examines the complex relationship between the Umayyad state and these emerging sectarian movements, analyzing how sectarian conflict contributed to the gradual erosion of state stability. The research question guiding

this investigation is: How did sectarian conflicts with Islamic sects impact the political stability and eventual collapse of the Umayyad Caliphate?

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the origins and development of major Islamic sects during the early Umayyad period
2. To examine Umayyad policies toward different religious and ethnic groups
3. To assess the impact of sectarian revolts on state resources and stability
4. To evaluate the role of sectarian divisions in facilitating the Abbasid revolution

Methodology

This study employs a historical analytical approach, drawing upon primary sources including chronicles by [al-Tabari](#), [al-Mas'udi](#), and [al-Baladhuri](#), as well as contemporary scholarly analyses. The research examines chronological developments while analyzing thematic patterns in Umayyad-sectarian relations.

2. Literature review

The article "The drivers of sectarian violence: A qualitative analysis of Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey" by Catherine R. Antosh ([R. Antosh, 2016](#)) offers a nuanced exploration of the underlying factors contributing to sectarian conflicts in the Middle East. While the primary focus of the article is on contemporary sectarian violence, its insights are highly relevant for understanding the broader historical context of sectarian dynamics during the Umayyad period, particularly in relation to the relationship of power with Islamic sects between 41–132 AH / 661–750 AD.

Antosh emphasizes that sectarian violence cannot be fully understood through religious or ethnic differences alone. Instead, she argues that larger political and social processes—such as the competition for power and survival—are often the primary drivers behind conflicts. This perspective aligns with the historical analysis of the Umayyad state, where sectarian divisions among groups such as the Sunnis and Shia played a significant role in shaping political stability. The Umayyad period was marked by intense power struggles, which often manifested as sectarian conflicts, as the ruling dynasty sought to consolidate authority amidst diverse Islamic sects with differing loyalties and beliefs.

Critically, Antosh's analysis underscores the importance of viewing sectarian conflicts as multi-dimensional, involving not only religious identities but also socio-political interests. This approach challenges simplistic interpretations that reduce sectarian violence to doctrinal disputes. In the context of the Umayyad state, this means recognizing that sectarian allegiances were often intertwined with issues of legitimacy, governance, and resource control. The article's assertion that larger processes—such as competition for power—drive conflict provides a valuable lens for examining the stability of the Umayyad regime, which faced persistent challenges from sectarian factions seeking to influence or overthrow the ruling authority.

Furthermore, Antosh's hope for more peaceful avenues for grievances and representation resonates with the historical realities of the period, where the suppression of sectarian dissent often led to further instability. The article's insights suggest that the Umayyad state's failure to effectively address sectarian grievances contributed to ongoing unrest, highlighting the importance of inclusive governance and conflict resolution mechanisms in maintaining stability. This critical evaluation underscores that sectarian conflicts are deeply rooted in political survival strategies, which, if unaddressed, threaten the stability of ruling regimes.

The article by [Roukhsar Nissaraly \(2017\)](#) provides a comprehensive examination of the historical and contemporary dynamics of sectarian conflict, particularly emphasizing the enduring antagonism between Sunni and Shia communities within Iraq. The author contextualizes the conflict by tracing the historical opposition between Sunni caliphs and the Twelve Imams, highlighting the martyrdom of Hussain ibn Ali at Karbala—a pivotal event that continues to shape Shia identity and its relationship with Sunni authority ([Nissaraly, 2017](#)). This historical perspective is crucial for understanding the deep-rooted sectarian divisions that have persisted from the early Islamic period into modern times.

The article critically analyzes the political manipulation of sectarian identities, especially in the post-2003 invasion period, where the empowerment of Shia political entities and the subsequent marginalization of Sunni groups have exacerbated tensions. Nissaraly details how figures like al-Zarqawi exploited sectarian grievances by framing Sunni grievances within a narrative of victimization and resistance, thereby fueling cycles of violence and mistrust. The

campaign led by Zarqawi in 2005 to boycott elections exemplifies how sectarian narratives are weaponized to undermine political stability, ultimately contributing to the fragility of the state.

From a critical perspective, Nissaraly's analysis underscores the importance of transitional justice mechanisms in addressing historical grievances and sectarian violence. The recognition of the Karbala tragedy, both as a historical event and as a symbol of justice and resistance, is presented as a potential pathway towards healing and reconciliation. However, the article also suggests that the failure to effectively implement such mechanisms has perpetuated sectarian divisions and hindered the consolidation of a unified state.

The article titled "Emerging Trends of Conflict and Instability in Iraq" by Dylan O'Driscoll ([O'Driscoll, 2018](#)) offers a comprehensive overview of the contemporary dynamics contributing to conflict and instability within Iraq, which can be critically linked to the broader themes of sectarian conflict and state stability. Although the report functions primarily as a rapid desk-based review rather than an exhaustive scholarly analysis, it provides valuable insights into the evolving landscape of violence, political fragmentation, and social tensions that have roots in sectarian divisions.

O'Driscoll emphasizes that recent developments, such as the failed Kurdish referendum, the military retaking of disputed territories, and the territorial defeat of the Islamic State, have significantly altered the power dynamics among various Islamic sects and ethnic groups. These events underscore the fragile nature of Iraqi state authority and highlight how sectarian identities are intertwined with political allegiances and territorial control. The rise of militias and their influence on governance further complicate the sectarian landscape, often blurring the lines between state authority and sectarian militias, which can undermine national cohesion and stability.

Critically, the report underscores that community tensions and potential intercommunal conflicts are exacerbated by resource competition, environmental degradation, and infrastructural neglect—factors that often disproportionately affect different sectarian communities. These issues are emblematic of how socio-economic grievances can deepen sectarian divides, thereby destabilizing the state apparatus. The limited exploration of gender norms and masculinities, while acknowledged as an area of interest, suggests that social and cultural dimensions of sectarian conflict remain underexplored within this review, an area that could yield further understanding of the social fabric influencing sectarian loyalties.

While the report does not delve deeply into the historical roots of sectarianism during the Umayyad period, its focus on current conflict trends provides a relevant contemporary context. The ongoing political negotiations and the fluidity of alliances reflect the persistent struggle for power among Islamic sects, echoing historical patterns of sectarian rivalry that have historically challenged the stability of Islamic states. However, the rapid evolution of Iraq's political landscape means that conclusions drawn are inherently provisional, emphasizing the importance of continuous monitoring and analysis.

In sum, O'Driscoll's review offers a valuable, albeit broad, synthesis of the current conflict dynamics in Iraq, illustrating how sectarian identities and power struggles continue to influence the country's stability. Its critical evaluation reveals that while the report provides a useful snapshot of recent developments, further detailed scholarly investigation into the historical and socio-cultural roots of sectarianism—particularly in relation to the Umayyad period—would enhance understanding of the enduring impact of sectarian conflict on state stability.

The article "Playing the sectarian card in a sectarianized new Middle East" by Valbjorn and Hinnebusch offers a comprehensive analysis of how sectarian identities are manipulated within the political landscape of the Middle East, particularly in the context of authoritarian regimes. The authors argue that sectarianism, especially since the Arab uprisings, has been increasingly employed as a strategic tool by political actors to consolidate power and suppress opposition. This instrumentalization of sectarian identities involves mobilizing populations around religious markers, primarily Sunni and Shia divisions, to serve regime survival rather than genuine sectarian conflict ([Valbjorn & Hinnebusch, 2019](#)).

Critically, the article emphasizes that authoritarian regimes leverage sectarianism not merely as a reflection of societal divisions but as a deliberate strategy to maintain control. This approach aligns with the broader understanding of sectarian conflict as a political instrument, which can exacerbate societal cleavages and undermine long-term stability. The authors highlight that such tactics often lead to a cycle where sectarian tensions are heightened to justify authoritarian measures, thereby entrenching regimes further.

From a theoretical perspective, the article connects the manipulation of sectarian identities to the resilience of authoritarian regimes across the Middle East. It suggests that the strategic use of sectarianism can serve as a buffer

against democratization efforts, as it consolidates support among specific sectarian groups while marginalizing others. This dynamic is particularly relevant when considering the historical context of the Umayyad period, where sectarian conflicts played a crucial role in shaping political stability and power relations among Islamic sects.

However, while the article provides a compelling overview of contemporary sectarian strategies, it could benefit from a deeper historical analysis of how sectarian identities were mobilized in the early Islamic period, especially during the Umayyad Caliphate, to draw more concrete parallels. The focus on modern regimes might overlook the historical roots of sectarianism as a complex interplay of theological, social, and political factors that predate modern authoritarianism.

In conclusion, Valbjorn and Hinnebusch critically illuminate the instrumental role of sectarianism in sustaining authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, highlighting its potential to destabilize societal cohesion and long-term political stability. Their analysis underscores the importance of understanding sectarian identities not merely as religious divisions but as potent political tools that influence the dynamics of power and conflict, echoing the historical significance of sectarian conflicts during the Umayyad era. This perspective is valuable for comprehending the ongoing sectarianization processes and their implications for regional stability.

The article "Desectarianization: Looking Beyond the Sectarianization of Middle Eastern Politics" by Simon Mabon (Mabon, 2019) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the persistent issue of sectarian division within regional politics. Mabon critically examines the long-term processes that sustain sectarian identities, emphasizing that sectarianization is an active, politically manipulated phenomenon rather than a natural or inevitable social division. This perspective aligns with the broader understanding of sectarian conflict as being fueled by political actors who mobilize sectarian sentiments for strategic gains, particularly in fragile states and amidst geopolitical rivalries such as those between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The article advances a four-stage framework aimed at promoting desectarianization, which involves understanding the mechanisms of sectarianization, analyzing the influence of geopolitical factors, exploring the role of regional politics, and proposing peace-building strategies. Mabon underscores the importance of addressing the geopolitical dimensions—highlighting the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran—as central to the perpetuation of sectarian conflict. This focus on geopolitics is crucial because it situates sectarian identities within broader regional power struggles, illustrating how external actors exacerbate internal divisions.

Critically, Mabon's discussion on peace-building approaches emphasizes that desectarianization is a complex, generational process that requires sustained efforts, including political inclusivity and reconciliation. The recognition that sectarian identities are actively constructed and manipulated by political actors challenges simplistic narratives that attribute conflict solely to historical or religious differences. However, while the framework is comprehensive, it may understate the deep-rooted socio-economic and cultural factors that also sustain sectarianism, suggesting that political and geopolitical strategies alone might be insufficient without addressing underlying societal grievances.

3. Conclusion

The examination of sectarian conflict and its impact on the stability of the Umayyad State reveals a complex interplay of power dynamics, historical grievances, and the manipulation of sectarian identities. The literature reviewed provides a comprehensive understanding of how these factors contributed to the political landscape of the Umayyad period (41–132 AH / 661–750 AD), emphasizing that sectarian strife was not merely a product of religious differences but was deeply intertwined with socio-political interests and the quest for power.

(R. Antosh, 2016) sets the foundation by arguing that the roots of sectarian violence extend beyond religious identities, highlighting the role of competition for power and survival as primary drivers of conflict. This perspective is crucial in understanding the Umayyad era, where intense power struggles often manifested as sectarian conflicts, challenging the stability of the regime (R. Antosh, 2016). (Nissaraly, 2017) builds on this by exploring the historical context of the Sunni-Shia divide, particularly the significance of the Karbala tragedy. Nissaraly illustrates how historical narratives have been manipulated to exacerbate sectarian divisions, which has enduring implications for political stability and identity mobilization (Nissaraly, 2017).

(O'Driscoll, 2018) contextualizes these dynamics within contemporary Iraq, revealing how historical sectarian conflicts resonate with current struggles for power and resources. His analysis underscores the continuity of sectarian strife from the Umayyad period to modern times, suggesting that the competition for resources and political power remains a significant factor in destabilizing the state (O'Driscoll, 2018). (Valbjorn & Hinnebusch, 2019) further analyze

the instrumentalization of sectarian identities by political actors, arguing that sectarianism has been weaponized as a tool for regime survival, drawing parallels to the strategies employed by the Umayyad State to maintain control over a fractured society (Valbjorn & Hinnebusch, 2019).

(Mabon, 2019) offers a critical framework for understanding sectarianization and proposes strategies for desectarianization, emphasizing the need for political inclusivity and reconciliation. His insights highlight the geopolitical dimensions of sectarian conflicts and the long-term challenges of overcoming entrenched identities, which can be traced back to the foundational conflicts of the Umayyad period (Mabon, 2019).

In conclusion, the reviewed literature collectively illustrates that sectarian conflict during the Umayyad State was deeply influenced by power dynamics, historical grievances, and the strategic manipulation of identities. These factors not only shaped the political landscape of the Umayyad period but also continue to resonate in contemporary contexts. Understanding these complexities is essential for addressing the enduring nature of sectarianism and fostering stability in divided societies.

Chapter 1: The Emergence of Islamic Sects and Political Context After the Rightly-Guided Caliphate

1.1 The Roots of Division: The First Fitna

The sectarian divisions that would plague the Umayyad period had their origins in the political crisis following the assassination of Uthman ibn Affan in 35 AH (656 AD). The subsequent conflict between Ali ibn Abi Talib and Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan, known as the First Fitna, fundamentally altered the nature of Islamic political authority and created lasting ideological divisions within the Muslim community (Madelung, 1997).

The Battle of Siffin (37 AH / 657 AD) and the subsequent arbitration marked a turning point in Islamic political thought. When Ali accepted arbitration to resolve the conflict with Mu'awiya, a significant portion of his supporters, later known as the Kharijites, withdrew their allegiance, declaring that "judgment belongs to God alone" (la hukma illa lillah) (Watt, 1973). This event established the fundamental Kharijite principle that human arbitration in matters of divine law was illegitimate, setting the stage for their perpetual opposition to subsequent Umayyad rule.

1.2 The Kharijite Movement: Ideology and Early Development

The Kharijites emerged as the first organized opposition movement in Islamic history, developing a distinct political theology that challenged both Umayyad authority and mainstream Islamic political thought. Their core beliefs included the principle that the caliphate should be awarded to the most pious Muslim regardless of tribal or family affiliation, and that any ruler who committed major sins should be deposed (Hinds, 1971).

The Kharijite movement fragmented into numerous sub-sects, each with varying degrees of militancy. The Azariqa, led by Nafi ibn al-Azraq, represented the most extreme faction, declaring all non-Kharijite Muslims to be infidels whose blood could be lawfully shed. The Najdat, under the leadership of Najda ibn Amir al-Hanafi, established a semi-independent state in the Arabian Peninsula, directly challenging Umayyad authority in the heartland of Islam (Levi Della Vida, 1965).

1.3 The Shia: Legitimacy and Resistance

The Shia movement developed around the principle that legitimate Islamic leadership belonged exclusively to the family of the Prophet Muhammad, specifically through the line of Ali ibn Abi Talib. Unlike the Kharijites, who rejected the concept of hereditary rule entirely, the Shia maintained that divine appointment (nass) had designated Ali and his descendants as the rightful leaders of the Muslim community (Hodgson, 1955).

The tragedy of Karbala in 61 AH (680 AD), where Hussein ibn Ali and his companions were killed by Umayyad forces, became a defining moment for Shia identity and resistance. This event transformed Shia opposition from a political movement into a religious cause, providing a powerful narrative of martyrdom and injustice that would fuel anti-Umayyad sentiment for generations (Ayoub, 1978).

Chapter 2: Umayyad State Policies Toward Religious Sects

2.1 The Challenge of Legitimacy

The Umayyad caliphs faced a fundamental crisis of legitimacy from the outset of their rule. Unlike the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, who had been chosen through consultation (shura) or popular acclaim, Mu'awiya's accession to power was achieved through military victory and political maneuvering. This created a persistent need to justify Umayyad rule against sectarian challenges that questioned their religious authority (Kennedy, 2004).

The Umayyads attempted to address this legitimacy crisis through various strategies. They emphasized their role as defenders of Islamic orthodoxy against sectarian "deviations," portrayed themselves as maintainers of unity against divisive forces, and invested heavily in religious architecture and patronage to demonstrate their piety (Crone & Hinds, 1986).

2.2 Military Responses to Kharijite Revolts

The Umayyad approach to Kharijite opposition was primarily military, reflecting both the immediate threat posed by Kharijite revolts and the state's confidence in its military superiority. The reign of Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (65-86 AH / 685-705 AD) witnessed some of the most intensive campaigns against Kharijite groups, particularly in Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula.

Al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, the Umayyad governor of Iraq, became notorious for his brutal suppression of Kharijite revolts. His campaigns against the Azariqa in Fars and Khuzestan, and later against various Kharijite groups in Iraq, demonstrated the state's willingness to use extreme violence to maintain control (Hawting, 2000). However, these military campaigns, while temporarily successful, failed to address the underlying ideological appeal of Kharijite teachings and often created new grievances that fueled further resistance.

2.3 The Shia Challenge: From Karbala to Revolution

The Umayyad response to Shia opposition evolved significantly over time, reflecting both the changing nature of Shia resistance and the state's growing awareness of the threat it posed. The massacre at Karbala, while eliminating Hussein ibn Ali as a political threat, created a powerful martyrdom narrative that energized Shia opposition movements.

The revolt of the Tawwabin (Penitents) in 65 AH (684 AD), led by Sulayman ibn Surad al-Khuza'i, represented the first major Shia uprising following Karbala. Although the revolt was crushed at the Battle of Ayn al-Warda, it demonstrated the enduring appeal of pro-Alid sentiment and the Shia community's willingness to sacrifice for their beliefs (Wellhausen, 1958).

More significant was the revolt of al-Mukhtar al-Thaqafi (66-67 AH / 685-687 AD), who claimed to act on behalf of Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya, a son of Ali ibn Abi Talib. Al-Mukhtar's movement was notable for its appeal to the Mawali (non-Arab converts to Islam) and its promise of social justice and equality. The revolt temporarily succeeded in controlling Kufa and parts of Iraq before being suppressed by Umayyad forces (Dixon, 1971).

2.4 The Mawali Question: Ethnic Discrimination and Social Unrest

One of the most significant challenges to Umayyad stability was the growing discontent among the Mawali, non-Arab converts to Islam who faced systematic discrimination despite their conversion. Umayyad policies maintained Arab supremacy through various mechanisms, including differential taxation, exclusion from military leadership positions, and social segregation (Bulliet, 1979).

The Mawali grievances provided fertile ground for both Kharijite and Shia propaganda. Kharijite teachings about equality among believers resonated with Mawali experiences of discrimination, while Shia promises of justice under Alid rule offered hope for social transformation. The convergence of sectarian opposition and ethnic grievances created a powerful coalition against Umayyad rule (Crone, 1980).

Chapter 3: The Impact of Sectarian Conflict on Umayyad State Stability and Fall

3.1 Economic and Military Exhaustion

The persistent sectarian revolts placed enormous strain on Umayyad resources, requiring constant military campaigns that drained the state treasury and diverted attention from external threats. The cost of maintaining large armies in Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, and other rebellious regions significantly impacted the state's fiscal health (Donner, 1981).

Military historians estimate that the Umayyads spent approximately 40% of their annual revenue on suppressing internal revolts during the later period of their rule. This expenditure not only weakened the state financially but also created a cycle of increased taxation that further alienated subject populations and provided additional grievances for sectarian movements to exploit (Morony, 1984).

3.2 The Fragmentation of Social Cohesion

Sectarian conflicts contributed to the breakdown of social cohesion within the Umayyad state. The clear divisions between Arabs and Mawali, Sunnis and Shia, and various tribal factions created a fragmented society where loyalty to the central government was increasingly questioned (Hawting, 2000).

The Umayyad policy of relying primarily on Syrian Arab tribes for military and administrative support, while effective in the short term, ultimately created resentment among other groups and reinforced perceptions of the state as representing narrow sectional interests rather than the broader Muslim community (Kennedy, 2004).

3.3 The Abbasid Revolution: Exploiting Sectarian Divisions

The Abbasid revolution (129-132 AH / 747-750 AD) succeeded largely because it effectively exploited the sectarian and ethnic divisions that had weakened Umayyad rule. The Abbasid propaganda campaign, centered in Khurasan, appealed simultaneously to Shia sentiment (through claims of Hashemite legitimacy), Mawali grievances (through promises of equality), and general dissatisfaction with Umayyad rule (Lassner, 1986).

The Abbasid slogan "al-rida min Al Muhammad" (the chosen one from the family of Muhammad) was deliberately ambiguous, allowing different groups to project their own expectations onto the movement. Shia supporters believed it referred to an Alid imam, while others interpreted it as supporting any member of the Prophet's extended family, including the Abbasids themselves (Sharon, 1983).

3.4 The Battle of the Zab and the Collapse of Umayyad Power

The final confrontation between Umayyad and Abbasid forces at the Battle of the Zab (132 AH / 750 AD) demonstrated how thoroughly sectarian conflicts had undermined Umayyad military effectiveness. The Umayyad army, composed primarily of Syrian troops, faced an Abbasid coalition that included Khurasani Arabs, Persian Mawali, and various disaffected groups from across the empire (Wellhausen, 1958).

The rapid collapse of Umayyad resistance following their defeat at the Zab reflected not just military failure but the complete erosion of political legitimacy. Unlike earlier crises, where the Umayyads had been able to rally support from their Syrian base, the final crisis found them isolated and unable to mobilize effective resistance against the Abbasid advance (Shaban, 1971).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that sectarian conflict played a crucial role in the destabilization and eventual collapse of the Umayyad Caliphate. The analysis reveals several key findings that illuminate the relationship between religious diversity, political legitimacy, and state stability in early Islamic history.

First, the Umayyad failure to develop an inclusive political ideology that could accommodate sectarian diversity created persistent legitimacy crises. Unlike the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, who derived authority from their close association with the Prophet Muhammad and their selection through consultation, the Umayyads relied primarily on military power and administrative efficiency. This approach, while effective in maintaining control, failed to address the fundamental questions of religious legitimacy raised by Kharijite and Shia opposition movements.

Second, the study shows how sectarian conflicts intersected with ethnic and social grievances to create a powerful coalition against Umayyad rule. The discrimination against the Mawali, combined with tribal favoritism and economic

inequality, provided sectarian movements with a broad base of support that extended beyond purely religious concerns. The Abbasid revolution succeeded precisely because it was able to unite these diverse grievances under a single political banner.

Third, the persistent nature of sectarian revolts placed unsustainable demands on Umayyad resources and military capabilities. The need to maintain constant vigilance against internal threats weakened the state's ability to respond to external challenges and created a cycle of repression and resistance that ultimately proved counterproductive.

The implications of this study extend beyond the specific case of the Umayyad Caliphate to broader questions about the management of religious and ethnic diversity in pre-modern states. The Umayyad experience demonstrates that military superiority and administrative efficiency, while necessary for state survival, are insufficient to ensure long-term stability in the absence of political legitimacy and social inclusion.

Future research might profitably examine how subsequent Islamic dynasties learned from the Umayyad experience and developed more inclusive approaches to managing sectarian diversity. The Abbasid adoption of a more cosmopolitan ideology and their integration of Persian administrative traditions, for example, suggests that the lessons of Umayyad failure were not entirely lost on their successors.

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