

# Tribe, State and Economy

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In this paper I wish to make some theoretical observations concerning the tribe, the state and the economy on the basis of the historical reality of Arab Islamic society at different periods.

Firstly, scholars tend to link tribalism with power because of the dialectal relationship between these two elements in the history of Arab Islamic society, but they generally omit mentioning the economic aspect.

Secondly, in my opinion, it is not possible to talk about the economy in absolute terms given that we are dealing with the economics of the Arab tribe, guardian of Bedouin values, as well as its influence over the power base in Arab society from the founding of Al-Madinah

up until the modern era. The Arab Islamic economy did not develop from one historical period to another, as happened in Europe, but in a qualitative change that gave birth to a new social class as a result of the pre-eminent position of the Arab Islamic community in the orbit of world trade. Nor, methodologically speaking, can the economic postulates of an urbanised pastoral society be applied to the means of production of the Arab Islamic city in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AH.

In no way should the economics of the tribe in Bedouin society be confused with the economy once the tribes had acceded to power in an increasingly urban context. Nor should the economic characteristics of nomadic Bedouin communities, primarily dependent on rearing livestock, be confused with those of their sedentary cousins who earn their living through farming.

I referred earlier to the way in which world trade created new means of production in the Arab Islamic city and led to the emergence of a new social class, but I should also mention a contemporaneous intellectual trend that sought to liberate Arab Islamic society from conservatism, especially in the shape of the clergy who gave unstinting support to the political status quo. I have used the term 'means of production' but this begs the question of the exact structure of Arab Islamic society in its Bedouin and urban manifestations. I shall, accordingly, exercise caution and refer to socio-economic formations at various stages of history rather than a change in means of production.

Thirdly, the star of the Arab Islamic city began to wane in the 5th century AH with the spread of 'military feudalism' under the Buwaihids, and more especially under the Seljuqs and Mamluks. I would go so far as to

say that this phenomenon was the deciding factor in the urban decline of the city and its diminishing influence in the surrounding countryside as a result of plundering by soldiers and Bedouin raids.

Evidence for this view is Maqrizi's description of old Cairo in the mid-5th century AH, which eloquently reflects the fear and destructiveness of the time:

*The commander of the armies, Badr Al-Jamali, entered old Cairo in 466 AH. The city was almost empty of its inhabitants, who had been decimated by plague, destruction and death. The few people remaining were like the walking dead, white with fear of the military and crushed by the punitively high cost of living. The slaves were in revolt and no one could be found to till the fields. Land and sea routes were blocked unless one journeyed under escort at prohibitively high cost. The new town of Al-Qahira had also become a*

*wasteland. The military and the Armenians as well as the locals were able to build wherever they wished and the houses of the dead in Old Cairo were razed to the ground to provide building materials for dwellings in Al-Qahira.*

Fourthly, in the Arab world, capital has always had a precarious status vis-a-vis political authority. In the past, confiscation and fines were a potent weapon against rich businessmen and rebellious tribes, and today the apparatus of taxation is employed to muzzle the most economically independent social classes. In addition, this precariousness of capital acted as brake on economic development in the 3rd and 4th centuries AH.

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Our starting point is the Arabian Peninsula where a predominant tribe, the Quraish, which was based in Mecca, emerged. This

commercially favourable location, with access to trade routes in the Indian Ocean and Syria and the Mediterranean, as well as East Africa, resulted in the Quraish becoming a world trading power that was dependant on a political framework of alliances and treaties. The 'Council Chamber' was the new command centre, which, in the fullness of time, acquired a religious dimension.

In this connection it is no exaggeration to say that it was economics that enabled the Arab Bedouin to contract alliances and submit to a new authority not based purely on tribalism. One could say that this new authority derived its legitimacy from consultation and maintaining the balance of power through the concluding of pacts. If we add the powerful factor of religion, the success of the Quraish in spearheading this new order on the Arabian Peninsula becomes clear; the Quraish community of Mecca tribalism became welded to political and economic power.

After the advent of Islam, tribal conflict reasserted itself, especially among the major tribes, and the need to contract new alliances outside the confines of Mecca became apparent. The Quraish quickly realised the threat to their political and economic supremacy and accepted the new religion. They dreamed of a new kind of alliance that would go beyond the bounds of tribalism. Their goal was nothing less than a united nation state whose influence would stretch beyond the Arabian Peninsula. The emergent state in Al-Madinah charged its leaders with specifying new aims, which were:

a. The political and strategic goal of western and northern expansion at the expense of the two great powers of the ancient world: the Byzantines and the Sassanids.

b. The related goal of advancing the banner of Islam.

The political and religious leadership understood that the realisation of these two aims necessitated material power with solid financial underpinnings. They began modestly enough with the type of economic structure familiar in city states in the ancient world but, with the major conquests that took place during the reign of the Second Caliph, Umar ibn Al-Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him), the situation changed. Umar was aware of the necessity of protecting financial resources to consolidate power in the new regions, in furtherance of the two stated aims. Indeed Umar's attitude towards the distribution of Al-Sawwad lands in Iraq to the conquerors can only be understood in the context of the new strategy. Umar was mindful of another, even more important factor - the tribal mentality, which constantly threatened the unity of the new state. After the experience of Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) with renegade tribes, Islam had succeeded in uniting the tribes around its banner but it was not powerful enough to dispel tribal arrogance, which Umar feared would raise its head just as



it had done after the death of the Prophet (prayers and peace be upon him). Umar hoped that the political and economic structure of the 'nation state' would curb the recalcitrance of tribal pretensions but these hopes were dashed in the reign of the Third Orthodox Caliph when tribal conflict reasserted itself, brotherliness turned to enmity and the community descended into civil war at the battle of Siffin, whose ramifications are felt to the present day.

The momentous change that overtook Arab Islamic society during the early period of Islam cannot be understood without reference to the economic background. The mission of the young Arab nation state carrying the banner of the new religion was eclipsed by the economic interests of a nascent social group who accumulated great wealth as a result of the Arab conquests. A brief description of the great wealth of some of the Companions of the Prophet is enough to indicate the momentous economic changes that had taken place.

*Talha ibn Ubaid Allah from Al-Ain left two million dirhams and two hundred thousand dinars. His revenue from Iraq amounted to one hundred thousand, apart from other revenues. His family derived their living from his farm at Qana, which was tilled by twenty camels. Al-Zubayr left fifty thousand dinars and one thousand horses, in addition to houses. When Zayd ibn Thabit died, he left prodigious quantities of gold and silver in addition to property valued at a hundred thousand dinars. When Yaali ibn Umiyya died he left five hundred thousand dinars, as well as debts and property valued at one hundred thousand dinars.*

Al-Mas'udi comments:

*One could expatiate on the subject of the vast wealth accumulated in those days, which*

*was not the case in the era of Umar ibn Al-Khattab.*

Al-Mas'udi continues:

*Abdurrahman ibn Auf bequeathed fifty thousand dinars in gold, as well as considerable fortune. He had one thousand camels, three thousand ewes, and his farm in Al-Jarf was tilled by twenty camels. He left four wives, whose share of his inheritance was between eighty thousand and one hundred thousand each. It is related that Abdurrahman left so much gold that those who broke it up with axes blistered their hands and Abdurrahman was not unique in this respect but comparable to other Companions and leaders of Quraish.*

What then were the social and political results of this momentous economic change

and the emergence of this wealthy class of Companions and leaders of Quraish?

The first result was the demographic changes that occurred in Al-Madinah and the towns that Umar planned as part of his population policy. By this means Umar hoped to prevent mass immigration into Al-Madinah, which would lead to social and political unrest. In the wake of the Arab conquests, Madinah had become a melting pot of prisoners, slaves and businessmen, among whom we find the Nabateans who took over the running of the market. Umar took the opportunity to inform the people about this but when he blamed them for not using the market, they replied, 'Allah gave it into our power to do this.' Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) replied, 'If you had done so, your menfolk would have needed their menfolk and your womenfolk their womenfolk.'

The class of slaves (of all types) and immigrants from the desert areas constituted the mainstay of the general class, referred to at that time as the rabble or the Arabs of the desert, who soon came to play an important role in social and political events. Although the leadership of the opposition to the Caliph Uthman (may Allah be pleased with him) was in the hands of a small group of Arab tribal leaders and descendants of the Companions, such as Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr (may Allah be pleased with them both), the opposition movement relied principally on the rabble and the desert Arabs. The Madinan aristocracy referred to them as the dregs, but these dregs gained ascendancy over the city during the long period of uprising against the Caliph Uthman (may Allah be pleased with him) and his party in the second half of his Caliphate. They surrounded the Caliph in his house, forbade him water and did not allow him to go out and pray in the mosque. The situation grew so critical that some of the well-known Companions left town to avoid being

humiliated by the rabble, as is clear from the description of Ali (may Allah honour him):

*My brothers, I am not unaware of what you know but what can I do with a people who own us and we do not own them? These are the people with whom our slaves rose up in support and with whom your Arabs of the desert allied themselves. Through them they are humiliating you at will. Do you see a way of achieving what you want? They said, 'No.' He said, 'By God, the only opinion I see is the one you are holding, if God wills.'*

This social group, which came to be known in Arab Islamic society as the general class or the common people, played a leading economic and social role at various periods of Islamic history, from the time of the orthodox caliphs up until the era of Islamic cities. They were the power base behind social uprisings in the cities, which were frequently religious in nature.

Umar ibn Khattab was able to handle the situation, although there were signs of rebelliousness in the latter part of his rule. However, the situation became more critical in the days of Uthman ibn 'Afan, who deviated from Umar's policy and adopted his own when he warned the people of Madinah in 30 AH, 'People of Madinah, be prepared and be united, for sedition is at the gates!' In fact discord broke out first of all in the new cities as a result of demographic factors before spreading to Al-Madinah and infiltrating the economic and social structures. When Sa'id ibn Al-'As took power in Al-Kufa in 30 AH he addressed the people thus: 'If dissension rears its head, I shall strike it and crush it.' And he wrote to Uthman (may Allah be pleased with him) saying: 'The people of Al-Kufa were unsettled but the men of honour won out and no affliction or calamity has taken root.'

The new social groups that came to represent the general class in Al-Madinah and the new cities adhered closely to the principles laid down by the Prophet Mohammed (prayers and peace be upon him) and which were supported thereafter by Abu Bakr and Umar (may Allah be pleased with them). Primarily among these was the principle of equality among Muslims and their participation through the principle of shura (consultation) in decision making in the community. They rejected favouritism and party politics based on the clan or the tribe. It is related by Saif that Mohammed and Talha stated:

*There is no precedence or priority in the council or in the leadership. They then criticised favouritism harshly and ruled it out as being unjustified and unwarranted. Arabs of the desert and freed slaves have been taken in by their words and they are now on the increase while others decrease until evil triumphs.*



The central authority was unable to control the demographic factor and the resultant political and economic problems until the situation in Al-Kufa deteriorated and rumour and unrest spread like wildfire.

The second result of the momentous economic change referred to earlier was the changes in tribal structure in the new cities. Tribal solidarity among the tribes who emigrated from Al-Madinah and settled in the new cities, or in the old cities in Iraq and Syria, had begun to wane in the face of a new rival social class - the general class. This class, which was largely composed of non-Arabs, contributed strongly to the social unrest in Arab Islamic cities, once again showing the link between the tribe, the economy and the ruling power.

I have dwelt in detail on the formative period of Arab Islamic society in the belief that this had a decisive influence on later periods. Doubtless each period is defined by its particular geographical and historical features, yet the model has persisted from the earliest days of Islam up to the foundation of the modern nation state, in which the tribal/economic/ power nexus endures under a veneer of modernity.

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How then did the relationship between tribe, state and economy continue?

The answer is that the role of the tribe remained important in the Umayyad and Abbasid eras but became less important when the state began to depend on soldiers from different ethnic backgrounds. The Arab Islamic city flourished in the 3rd and 4th

centuries AH as a result of the expansion in international trade and the growth of professional crafts. Subsequently, in the eastern part of the Arab world the phenomenon of military feudalism became implanted from the time of the Buwaihid dynasty up to the Ottoman era with dire consequences for Arab Islamic society and the role of the tribe diminished sharply, especially after the Seljuq era. However, in the western part of the Arab world military feudalism did not take root and the Maghrebi tribes that embraced Islam maintained their tribal structures and were not weakened by emigration, as was the case with the tribes on the Arabian Peninsula. In this region tribalism was a decisive factor in the foundation of dynasties from the 2nd century AH up to the Merinid era in Fez, and was closely linked to the economy. City states like Taharut, Sijilmassa, Fez and Marrakech thrived commercially on the basis of the gold brought by camel caravans from Sudan, which underpinned the economies of the tribal states of the Maghreb. However, the 8th century AH

marked the onset of the period of cultural and social decline, described by the historian Ibn Khaldun:

*When we consider the countries of the east such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq/Persia, India and China, and the countries beyond the Mediterranean, we see that their numerous cities and abundant populations flourished on the basis of their great wealth derived from trade and commerce. The accounts we have of the fabulous prosperity of these countries were brought to the Muslims of the Maghreb by Christian traders, as well as by merchants from the east. The most extraordinary tales of fabled riches came from Persia, India and China, and one is tempted to explain them on the basis of the valuable gold and silver mines monopolised by those countries. But this is not the case since their wealth was used to bring their commerce to other countries, and if their wealth had been so prodigious then they would have no need to trade with others at all. On the other hand when we consider the countries*

*of Ifriqiyya and Cyrene, we notice that they are sparsely populated so that their people live in penury and tax revenues are low, in contrast to the earlier wealth of the shi'a and sanhaja states with their abundant tax revenues and large budgets. As an example of the latter consider the thousand camel loads of wealth sent from Qairawan by Jawhar Al-Rumi to provision his troops during his campaign to conquer Egypt.*

*The Maghreb states had previously been wealthy but their Berber civilisation declined until their situation resembled that of Ifriqiyya, whereas formerly their writ had run from the Mediterranean in the north to Sudan in the south and Cyrene in the east. Now the majority of this region is desert and wasteland, apart from the coastal strip and hills. Verily Allah is the inheritor of the earth and he is the best of inheritors.*

The relationship between tribe, state and economy does not differ in the Maghreb from the situation referred to in the Arab east, apart from the phenomenon of military feudalism, which took root in that region especially during the Seljuq and Mamluk eras. This is not to say that the phenomenon did not exist at all in the Maghreb but that it was less extensive in scope and had less impact on the economic and political scene. The reason for this lies in the nature of tribal organisation whereby the land - especially pasturage in the desert and hill regions - was under common tribal ownership. Another factor was tribal solidarity, which prevented the state from taking the land from the tribes in order to distribute it to the military, as happened in the countries of the Arab east. In Al-Andalus the phenomenon of tribal solidarity was widespread in the early years after its conquest by Arab and Berber tribes but over time it declined in inverse proportion to the fortunes of the city states, with their professional craft guilds and varied social structures. The city state, rather than the tribe, came to represent

the power base and only declined with the rise of military feudalism, which Al-Tartoushi describes in Siraj Al-Muluk:

*I heard military leaders and notables of Al-Andalus saying, 'The Muslims were in the ascendant and their enemies were in disarray when the land was divided up among the soldiers. They cultivated the land and treated the peasants well. Agriculture thrived and flocks and weapons were in abundance until the last days of the rule of Ibn Abi Amir, who returned the soldiers' gifts of land to monthly labourers, confiscated the wealth of the greedy, and raised tax collection to punitive levels. The citizens began to flee in the face of these draconian measures, tax revenues declined and the economy collapsed. The military was now in a weaker position than their enemies, who began to overrun the Muslims' territory and gain in strength until the appearance of the "Veiled Warriors" (the Almoravides), who returned the feudal estates to the military.'*

Therefore, the link between the state and the economy through military feudalism was prevalent in Al-Andalus and the eastern part of the Arab world but not in the Arab Maghreb, where the tribalism continued to be important up to the beginning of the modern age.

What then was nature of the relation between tribe, state and economy?

My belief is that it was mostly a fraught one, especially in difficult economic times when the state was forced to raise new kinds of taxes beyond the limits laid down by Islamic Sharia in the early city state. Excessive taxation was frequently a potent weapon in the hands of political opponents of the regime.

If we revert to the Ibn Khaldun perspective we can discern an organic link between



prosperity and taxation policy, whether for good or for ill. If the taxation policy of the city state was equitable and even-handed, citizens worked harder and prosperity, as well as tax revenues, increased. In contrast, an iniquitous and burdensome tax regime led to economic stagnation and falling prosperity with the result that tax revenues fell at the very moment when they were needed for reconstruction and regeneration. The relationship between policy and economy is also clear in that oppression leads to economic decline whether this oppression takes the form of over taxation or some other injustice perpetrated on citizens. A state needs its citizens and the backbone of citizens is wealth. The road to wealth is through prosperity and the road to prosperity is through justice. In Ibn Khaldun's view, one of the clearest forms of justice is economic justice. State oppression can go beyond an unjust taxation policy to a situation where all trade is in the hands of the ruling power and all private wealth is subject to confiscation. The Fatimid regimes in the Maghreb were notorious for this type of economic injustice,

especially in regard to labour costs and workers' rights.

*One of the worst types of economic injustice is the conscription of labour without due reward since labour is one of the principal wealth-creating factors and earning one's living a fundamental right in society.*

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Now that we are at the beginning of the 3rd millennium what is the relationship between tribe, state and economy in Arab Islamic society?

The relationship has become globalised and subsumed into the modernisation process; in short, it has become part of consumer society. Nevertheless, the link between tribalism and power is still strong and affects policy making

to the detriment of modernisation. At a deeper level, tribalism is a state of mind and, in spite of appearances to the contrary, the tribal mentality is still a strong influence in people's lives. All the indications are that the road to true modernisation in Arab Islamic society will be a long and winding one.

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