

# ABBASID CULTIVATION OF IRANIAN DISSENT IN KHORASAN

BEHNAM FAYYADH

---

---

*This paper looks at how the cultivation of dissent towards the ruling Umayyad dynasty among the native Iranian population of Khorasan was immensely beneficial to accomplishing the goals of the Abbasid revolution. It is argued that the conquest of Khorasan by the revolutionaries was accomplished through a skillful clandestine propaganda campaign by the Abbasids, which culminated in simultaneous popular uprisings that overwhelmed Umayyad forces in the region and forced them to capitulate control of Khorasan. These popular uprisings then allowed the core of the revolutionary Abbasid forces to build a solid base and consolidate their power in Khorasan, without having to suffer any significant losses. The paper looks at how the Abbasid propaganda seized on the grievances of the local Iranian population living under Umayyad rule, and how it used these grievances as a means of conquering Khorasan without having to risk significant losses to their relatively outnumbered armed forces. The causes of the resentment of local Iranian populations of Khorasan towards the Umayyads are briefly addressed, as is the form of propaganda that the revolutionaries may have used to cultivate and organize popular uprisings, based on primary source accounts of speeches by leaders of the revolutions. Secondary sources are also used to shed light on how significant the underlying grievances of the Iranian population towards Umayyad rule may have been in facilitating support for the Abbasids' quest to conquer Khorasan and ultimately overthrow the Umayyad dynasty.*

---

---

The Abbasid Revolution that began in 747 CE in the Khorasan province of the Umayyad dynasty would undeniably change the course of Islamic and Near Eastern history in a profound way, and as a result has been the subject of intense scholarly debate in the modern era. Much of the current debate focuses on the ethnic and linguistic character of the military force used by the Abbasids against their Umayyad enemies, and the civilian uprisings in the Umayyad province of Khorasan where the revolution began have arguably been neglected or overlooked as a less

significant factor in the ultimate success of the revolution. It can be argued that the relative ease with which the Abbasids were able to conquer the Khorasan province was largely due to the fact that they had the tacit support of the local population, who had risen up in revolt against the Umayyad garrisons in the major urban centres, and this in turn allowed the Abbasids to amalgamate their army and form a base from which to launch further offensive operations against the Umayyads. The conquest of Khorasan was achieved through a vigorous and persistent propaganda campaign by the Abbasids, which was principally aimed at addressing the socio-economic, socio-political and ethnically driven grievances of the Iranian population under Umayyad rule. By harvesting the resentment of the Iranian masses, and converting it into an organized armed revolt against a dispersed and numerically inferior Umayyad Arab army stationed in Khorasan, Abu Muslim and his Abbasid patrons were able to wrest control of Khorasan without incurring significant losses. This in turn allowed the movement to consolidate power and swell their ranks, before marching west to face the mainstay of Umayyad forces, in what would become the critically decisive battles of the Abbasid revolution. The subsequent success of the Abbasid revolution, and resulting destruction of the Umayyad dynasty, can therefore be explained in part by the resentment caused by discriminatory Umayyad policies towards the Iranian population of Khorasan, and the neglect of government officials to address these grievances sufficiently.

The principal complaint of the Iranian population living under Umayyad rule, which led to vehement opposition and the most serious grievances, was economic in origin.<sup>1</sup> The imposition of the *jizyah*, or the poll tax, in addition to the *kharaj*, or what is commonly understood as the land tax continued from the Sassanid system, had a crippling effect on the Iranian peasantry, who were already being taxed relatively heavily under the Sassanids.<sup>2</sup> The *dihqans*, or Persian land owning aristocracy in charge of collecting taxes for the Umayyad governors of Khorasan, were undoubtedly guilty of pressuring the peasantry too much by demanding both the *jizyah* and the *kharaj*, most likely because they were paid for their services by taking a share of the taxes collected.<sup>3</sup> Even though the *dahaqin* actively discouraged conversion,<sup>4</sup> many Iranian peasants began to see conversion as a way to relieve themselves from the burden of heavy taxation.

In the year 700, a great number of Iranian peasants converted to Islam, and travelled to Iraq to submit to Allah in front of the Umayyad governor al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi, from whom they demanded to be exempt from paying the *jizyah*.<sup>5</sup> He sent them back to Khorasan without any such agreement, and did not even recognize

---

<sup>1</sup>Guzman, "The 'Abbasid Revolution," 235.

<sup>2</sup>Guzman, 237.

<sup>3</sup>Guzman, 233.

<sup>4</sup>Guzman, 236.

<sup>5</sup>Guzman, 231.

them as Muslim, mostly due to his understanding of the economic impact it would have on the Umayyad treasury.<sup>6</sup> The Umayyads had attempted to pacify Khorasan before by promising to remove the burden of *jizyah* from the Iranian *mawali*- the term used for non-Arab converts to Islam-, but had to rescind their order as a result of the severe strain put on the treasury as a result of the huge influx of converts to Islam.<sup>7</sup> This decision proved disastrous in terms of stirring up dissent, and culminated in a series of serious revolts that broke out in Sughd from 728-729.<sup>8</sup> Ancient sources clearly list the complaints of the *mawali* about being charged the *jizyah* even after converting, to the last Umayyad governor of Khorasan, Nasr ibn Sayyar, who told the aggrieved *mawali* that he would collect their *jizyah* from non-Muslims.<sup>9</sup> Even though the grievances of the Iranian Khorasani peasants were originally almost exclusively economic, they would evolve into something much larger, which now involved socio-ethnic dimensions, and a general feeling of discrimination at the hands of the Umayyad governors of Khorasan. Having failed at being granted an exemption from the *jizyah* through conversion to Islam, the only way to become liberated from the burden of heavy taxes seemed to be violent revolt.<sup>10</sup> The Abbasids used these grievances and anti-Umayyad sentiments to great effect in their persistent and clandestine propaganda campaign in Khorasan, by promising the Iranian population relief from heavy taxes, as well as something infinitely more valuable: inclusion into the government and equality under the banner of Islam.

One indicator which may suggest that the grievances of the Iranian population were not entirely economical, was the enthusiastic willingness with which the *dihāqin* were to join and support the Abbasid revolt. The clandestine campaign of anti-Umayyad propaganda aimed at harvesting dissent, is believed to have started around 718, and persisted up until 747 when Merv fell to the Abbasid revolutionaries.<sup>11</sup> This means that by the time the Abbasids were ready to make their opposition to Umayyad rule public, the Iranian population, both peasantry and aristocracy, had been thoroughly indoctrinated against the Umayyads.<sup>12</sup> Even though the Persian aristocracy and the bureaucratic elite were playing increasingly important roles within the Umayyad administration, they nevertheless still suffered the degradation and disabilities of their *mawali* status.<sup>13</sup> This made them perfect targets for the Abbasid propaganda, which emphasized the equality of Muslims regardless of ethnicity and ancestry.<sup>14</sup> The Abbasids could not have accomplished

---

<sup>6</sup>Guzman, 231.

<sup>7</sup>Moshe, *Revolt*, 28.

<sup>8</sup>Moshe, 28.

<sup>9</sup>Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 1688.

<sup>10</sup>Guzman, 235.

<sup>11</sup>Guzman, 244.

<sup>12</sup>Agha, "Abu Muslim's Conquest," 341.

<sup>13</sup>Arjomand, "Abd Allah Ibn al-Muqaffa," 12.

<sup>14</sup>Kennedy, *The Prophet*, 126.

the conquest of Khorasan with such relative ease without the tacit consent, and enthusiastic enrollment of the Persian land owning aristocracy into the revolution, which was a direct result of a generation of propaganda aimed towards ethnic Iranian sentiments.

The underground and clandestine nature of the revolutionary movement from its outset up until the time it was made public, means that records of the Abbasid propaganda, and their call to *da'wah*, or the mission, are not readily available. Clear insights into what their propaganda would have looked like during the generation or so spent fomenting resentment and dissent towards the Umayyad rule within the local Iranian population of Khorasan, can be gained by looking at speeches and attitudes of the revolution's leaders after their position was made public. Qahtaba ibn Shabib gives a glimpse into how the Iranian resentment of being conquered and ruled over by foreign Syrian Arabs was harvested, in a speech that he gives to rouse the men of Khorasan, before they are to engage the largest Umayyad Syrian force they had encountered to date.<sup>15</sup> He references how the land of Khorasan had belonged to their forefathers, and how it had been conquered by the race of the prophet, clearly referencing the Arabs, and how their land and women were taken while their children were enslaved.<sup>16</sup> He goes on to say that the Umayyad governance has become oppressive and caused the local population to fear them as a result, and that the men of Khorasan now have the opportunity to exact vengeance and punishment upon their unjust oppressors, and in turn reclaim the lands of Khorasan which belonged to their forefathers.<sup>17</sup>

Abu Muslim, the charismatic quasi-legendary leader of the Abbasids in Khorasan who is credited with organizing the Iranian masses in Khorasan against their Umayyad rulers, also exhibits a main principle of Abbasid propaganda, which claims that the Khorasanis are justified in their attempt to rid themselves of Umayyad rule by any means necessary, as a result of the oppression they have suffered. When the delegation of Nasr bin Sayyar makes accusations of atrocities committed by the Iranian population through their massacre of the Umayyad forces in Nasa, Talaqan, Marw al Rudh, Amul and Zamm, Abu Muslim responds by saying that while he did not instruct these acts, he cannot blame the perpetrators as they were a community that was targeted for oppression and bloodshed.<sup>18</sup> Through the study of these passages, among many others, it becomes easier to form a picture of what the Abbasid propaganda aimed at the Iranian population may have looked like, and how this propaganda was instrumental in cultivating a powerful organized revolt that would spell the end of Umayyad rule in Khorasan and beyond.

---

<sup>15</sup>Al-Tabari, 2005.

<sup>16</sup>Al-Tabari, 2005.

<sup>17</sup>Al-Tabari, 2006.

<sup>18</sup>Agha, 344.

Merely harvesting resentment and using it to incite random acts of revolt, would not have been nearly enough to dislodge a powerful, well disciplined, experienced and organized Umayyad army and government in Khorasan. Orchestrating the dissent into an organized armed uprising and timing the revolts perfectly would be instrumental to the success of the Abbasids, a task that was carried out immaculately by Abu Muslim. The conquest of Khorasan was not achieved by marching armies, but rather through the careful orchestration of local eruptions, which in turn allowed the Abbasids to keep their armed forces fully intact before facing off in pitched battles with the Umayyads down the road.<sup>19</sup> This was achieved through Abu Muslim's organizational ability to engulf the entire region in one simultaneous blaze, by having the Iranian masses use their numerical superiority to crush dispersed Arab contingents at one time all over the districts of Khorasan.<sup>20</sup> The simultaneous occurrence of revolts in so many districts at the same time, would not allow the Umayyads to gather their dispersed forces and therefore be able to put down any of the insurrections effectively, which in turn allowed Abu Muslim and the Abbasid army to capture Merv, the capital of Khorasan and seat of the Umayyad governor, without any bloodshed.<sup>21</sup> Khorasan was therefore conquered without any major pitched battles, which in turn allowed the Abbasids to consolidate their power and recruit many new fighters into their relatively thin ranks, allowing the Abbasids to be able to effectively challenge a numerically superior Umayyad army further down the road.

The seeds of resentment to the Umayyad rule in Khorasan were planted by the Umayyads themselves, in the form of their ethnically discriminatory practices towards the local Iranian population. Skillful Abbasid propaganda over the course of a generation, aimed at fostering the sentiments of the disgruntled Iranians, watered and cultivated these seeds into a powerful atmosphere of opposition to Umayyad rule. This opposition was then carefully organized, and when the time was right, deliberately ignited into a simultaneous revolutionary eruption throughout Khorasan that overwhelmed the Umayyad troops stationed in the province, thereby allowing the Abbasids to conquer Khorasan with minimal losses to their main fighting force. The relative ease with which the Abbasids managed to conquer Khorasan was due in no small part to the tacit support of the local Iranian population as a result of their opposition to Umayyad rule and their aspirations of social equality, and it was this base of local partisans allowed them to consolidate their gains and solidify the foundation of their revolution. It can therefore be argued that the discrimination suffered by the Iranian population of Khorasan, at the hands of their Umayyad rulers, can be directly cited as one of the most significant factors in the success of the Abbasid revolution and consequent destruction of the Umayyad dynasty.

---

<sup>19</sup>Agha, 344.

<sup>20</sup>Agha, 345.

<sup>21</sup>Agha, 345.

---

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AGHA, SALEH SA'ID, "Abu Muslim's Conquest of Khurasan: Preliminaries and Strategy in a Confusing Passage of the *Akhbar Al-Dawlah Al-'Abbasiyyah*", *Journal of American Oriental Studies* 120, no. 3 (2000): 333-347.
- AGHA, SALEH SA'ID. *The revolution which toppled the Ummayyads: neither Arab nor 'Abbasid*. Boston: Brill, 2003.
- ARJOMAND, SAID AMIR. "'Abd Allah Ibn al-Muqaffa' and the 'Abbasid Revolution.'" *Iranian Studies* 27, no 1/4 (1994): 9-36.
- GUZMAN, ROBERTO MARIN. "The 'Abbasid revolution in Central Asia and Khurasan: An analytical study of the role of taxation, conversion, and religious groups in its genesis." *Islamic Studies* 33, no. 2/3 (1994): 227-252.
- KENNEDY, HUGH. *The Prophet and the Age of Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century*. London: Pearson Education Limited, 2004
- MOSHE, SHARON. *Revolt: The social and military aspects of the 'Abbasid revolution': Black banners from the east*. Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1990.
- SHABAN, M. A. *The 'Abbasid Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- TABARI, *The History of al-Tabari Volume 2, 27*. Translated by John Alden Williams. 1985. Reprint with revisions, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985.
- 
-