The Impact of Urban Iranian Culture on the Administrative Structure of Muʿāwiya's Government (A Study of the Dīwāns)

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ABSTRACT

The Sasanian dynasty, as one of the most powerful Iranian dynasties, ruled for nearly four centuries. The administrative organization of this dynasty possessed distinctive characteristics, such that after its collapse, its cultural and administrative elements exerted a substantial influence on the governmental structures of the early Islamic centuries, particularly on the court of Muʿāwiya. The Sasanian court, like the golden age of the Achaemenids, enjoyed great majesty, splendor, and a distinguished status. The ancient legacy of this dynasty's administrative system, despite various invasions, preserved its identity and continued to shape the administrative structure of governments in the Islamic period. It can be stated that Muʿāwiya was the first ruler in the Islamic era who, in imitation of the courts of the kings of Iran and Rome, appointed and employed bodyguards and chamberlains, established specialized bureaus for the administration of civil and military affairs, constructed palatial buildings, and, contrary to the austere lifestyle of the early caliphs, adopted a life of luxury and courtly indulgence. This study, using a descriptive–analytical method, seeks to examine the impact of the administrative elements of the Sasanian period on the government of Muʿāwiya. The central question of the research is: What were the reasons for Muʿāwiya's inclination toward adopting the administrative institutions of the Sasanian era, and which dīwāns were most influenced by Iranian administrative elements?

Keywords: *Sasanian period, administrative elements, Muʿāwiya, governmental structure.*

Introduction

Historians are in general agreement that the structure of Muʿāwiya's government was influenced by four major elements: Iranian, Roman, tribal traditions, and Islamic norms (1). However, there is no consensus regarding the extent of influence exerted by each of these four components. Some scholars, rather than considering the structure of Muʿāwiya's state as primarily shaped by Iranian culture, interpret it as a form of revived pre-Islamic (Jāhilī) culture within an Islamic framework (2). On this basis, they regard the revival of Jāhilī tribal solidarity as one of the principal causes of its eventual decline (3). Other researchers, while emphasizing Jāhilī culture, do not attribute a fundamental role to Roman culture and instead confine their analytical focus to Iranian culture, arguing that Muslims conquered only parts of the Roman Empire (4, 5), whereas they gained control over almost the entire Sasanian Empire (with the exception of its northern regions). In support of this position, they sometimes refer to earlier processes through which elements of ancient Iranian culture had already been transmitted to Arab society prior to Islam (6).

In light of the foregoing considerations, the principal objective of this study is to conduct a detailed investigation into the extent of the contribution of Sasanian culture and administrative institutions to the governmental structure of Muʿāwiya. The main hypothesis is that the influence of Iranian administrative culture was more significant in sustaining state-affiliated administrative institutions than in shaping the structure of political power during the Umayyad period.

The Rise of Muʿāwiya and His Pattern of Imitation

The rise of Muʿāwiya and the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty on the throne of power were the result of a gradual and peaceful transformation that began during the caliphate of ʿUmar and culminated in the appointment of the first caliph of this dynasty following the death of his brother (7). After this appointment, Muʿāwiya, by attracting tribal aristocracy that sought self-reconstruction and revival in the Islamic era, made use of their experience—an experience shaped by prior patterns of submission to the emperors of Rome—and thereby consolidated his dominance over them (7). Predictions of this form of monarchical establishment appear frequently in Islamic sources (8, 9). Regardless of the historical accuracy of these reports, the manner in which power was consolidated clearly indicates a fundamental transformation in the logic of political ascendancy, grounded in coercion and domination. Al-Maqrizi, who sought to trace the genealogy of Umayyad authority in Syria and subsequently throughout the Islamic world, maintained that the foundations of their rise to power had already been laid during the lifetime of the Prophet (9). Although some sources present a contrary account (10), this does not affect the overall conclusion, for in either case their ascent and consolidation of power—whether during the Prophet's lifetime or during the caliphate of ʿUthmān—relied on force and coercion.

Prior to the formal establishment of the dynasty, historical reports attest to Muʿāwiya's emulation of the political culture of Īrānshahr. At times he was referred to as the "Kisrā of the Arabs" (11, 12), and at other times it is reported that he would listen until dawn to Persian narratives, while individuals recited for him the stories of the kings of Iran (10). Historical records mention only two Iranian individuals who held the office of secretary in the Umayyad court after the establishment of the dynasty; however, some reports indicate that approximately four thousand Iranians settled in Syria following the conquests of the period of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (7, 13). It is plausible that a number of these individuals, some of whom were Aswārān (elite cavalrymen), recited such narratives for Muʿāwiya both before and after the establishment of the Umayyad caliphate.

Perhaps the most explicit articulation of Muʿāwiya's imitation of Iranian kingship is found in the views of Ibn Khaldūn and Mawdūdī. Ibn Khaldūn explains that "the early caliphate emerged without kingship; then its meanings and purposes became confused and intertwined, and once the royal ʿaṣabiyya was separated from the caliphal ʿaṣabiyya, it was transformed into absolute monarchy" (14). According to him, power relations in early Islamic society were initially grounded in religion, with authority and restraint arising from individual conscience and belief. Such a system constituted the caliphate; however, gradually tribal solidarity and the sword replaced religion in the social order. With the passing of the Prophet, the fading of living memory of his miracles, and the end of the generation that had directly witnessed them, that divine support diminished, and religious solidarity and the ethos of obedience and submission were progressively transformed. Governance then came to be based on pre-Islamic custom and tradition. Ibn Khaldūn explicitly states that the Umayyad state, in its system of kingship and administration, imitated earlier states, particularly Iran. Rulers consistently followed the customs and practices of

Iranian governments, and when the Islamic state conquered Iran and Rome, it employed many experts from these peoples; through this process, "Iranian civilization was transmitted to the Arab Umayyad state" (14).

Mawdūdī likewise emphasizes Jāhilī traditions in the transformation of the caliphate and the establishment of kingship. Citing Muʿāwiya's statement, "I am the first of the kings," and invoking the Prophetic tradition that "the caliphate after me will last thirty years, then it will become kingship," he maintains that the final stage of this transformation was completed during Muʿāwiya's rule (15). He identifies the conclusion of these thirty years with Rabīʿ al-Awwal 661 CE, when Imam Ḥasan relinquished the caliphate in favor of Muʿāwiya. Mawdūdī attributes the emergence of this kingship to the influence of the Iranian element and non-Arab ʿaṣabiyya, which he considers prior to the Arab ʿaṣabiyya articulated by the Umayyads (15).

In contrast to the accounts of Ibn Khaldūn and later scholars, some researchers argue that the transformation of the caliphate into kingship reflected less the influence of Iranian culture than the resurgence of a "revived Jāhilī order" within a religious framework (7, 16).

The Political Structure of Muʿāwiya's Government

The majority of early Islamic historians and contemporary scholars agree that the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty and its mode of acquiring power constituted a fundamental rupture in the structure of the state and political system in Islam. This "rupture" was essentially the transformation of the institution of the "caliphate" into "kingship" or "monarchy," which occurred after the accession of the founder of the Umayyad house and persisted until the collapse of the dynasty, when it was inherited by the ʿAbbāsids. How did this transformation occur, and to what extent did Iranian political culture influence the establishment and continuation of this "structure"? Was the so-called Islamic monarchy, whose origins are traced to the Umayyad era, essentially identical to the Iranian model of kingship that had prevailed throughout pre-Islamic Iranian history? And if it was not identical—given the differing historical contexts—what elements of that Iranian kingship were imitated during the period of the Umayyad caliphs, and how were the conditions for such imitation created? These questions cannot be adequately addressed without analyzing the structure of the Umayyad state from a sociological perspective.

In any case, Muʿāwiya ascended the throne through a "policy of domination," exercised authoritarian control over the remaining consultative bodies and the broader Muslim community, including both the Anṣār and the Muhājirūn (17), and designated that year—661 CE—as the "Year of Unity." From the perspective of some scholars, his kingship rescued Islam and the state from a condition that threatened their very survival (16). In their view, this development represented a historical inevitability, for otherwise the foundations of the Islamic state would have been placed in jeopardy.

The Administrative Structure of Muʿāwiya's Government

When the religion of Islam expanded beyond the Arabian Peninsula and non-Arab populations entered the Islamic community, it gradually moved away from its initial simple form and progressively assumed the character of a state that sought to govern diverse peoples and vast territories. At this stage, the leaders of Islam realized that in order to sustain such a polity, the simple and rudimentary administrative arrangements with which they were familiar were no longer sufficient, and that their government required an appropriate organizational structure, the starting point of which can be traced to the era of ʿUmar (18). In the fifteenth year of the Hijra, when vast treasures arrived

in Medina and ʿUmar sought a method for their distribution, an Iranian frontier commander in Medina proposed the establishment of a dīwān (8, 10, 13, 19).

Although some sources have pointed to the influence of Roman culture in the foundation of the dīwān, there is stronger evidence indicating that Muslims were influenced primarily by the Iranian model. In early sources, the institution created by ʿUmar is explicitly referred to as a "dīwān," while in some later sources it is called the Dīwān al-Jaysh or Dīwān al-Jund. Other sources also mention the Dīwān al-ʿAṭāʾ, the Dīwān of expenditure and land tax (kharāj), and the bureau responsible for the distribution of fayʾ among the people.

From the caliphate of Muʿāwiya onward, the Islamic caliphate, which until then had largely functioned as a form of religious leadership, gradually evolved into a system of statecraft and monarchy. Under these conditions, the state created specialized dīwāns for the administration of its affairs, and, in the words of Ibn Khaldūn, the "imperial and expansionist power" of the Umayyad era led to the emergence of additional dīwāns (14). In response to this necessity, four principal types of dīwān were established during the Umayyad period.

Dīwān al-Jund

The Dīwān al-Jund was the bureau that had first come into existence in the Islamic state at the suggestion of Hormuzān and under the influence of Iranian culture. During the Umayyad period, it became more specialized, and its functions consisted primarily of maintaining records of military personnel and providing for their needs (20). Under ʿUmar, the Dīwān al-Jund possessed both military and non-military functions; however, during the Umayyad period its activities were confined exclusively to military affairs. Despite this increasing specialization, it should not be assumed that the Umayyad caliphs were able to revive the Sasanian military system in its entirety, for the Sasanian era had possessed a complex recruitment structure that required prospective soldiers to pass through various stages before entering service, failing which they were barred from military duty.

Dīwān al-Khātam

Another bureau that emerged in the Islamic period under the influence of Iranian culture was the Dīwān al-Khātam. This dīwān was established during the reign of Muʿāwiya (12, 19, 21). Although the use of a seal (khātam) had been common during the lifetime of the Prophet of Islam (13), under the Umayyads it became institutionalized as a formal administrative office.

The first Arab to establish a "Dīwān al-Khātam" in imitation of the Iranians, to introduce systematic copying of official correspondence, and to consolidate royal authority for Muʿāwiya was Ziyād ibn Abī Sufyān. Iranian dehqāns appear to have played a significant role in the formation of this bureau, for Ziyād was the first to employ dehqāns in the dīwāns (7). This bureau was devoted to the registration and preservation of the caliph's decrees. The procedure required that before any decree was issued, it was brought to this office, a copy was made, the document was bound with thread and sealed with wax, and after the head of the bureau affixed his seal, it was retained there.

The reason for the establishment of this bureau has been explained as follows: when Muʿāwiya wrote an order for ʿUmar ibn al-Zubayr to his governor Ziyād, ʿUmar opened the letter and altered the word "one hundred" (miʾah) to "two hundred" (miʾatayn). Consequently, Muʿāwiya instituted the Dīwān al-Khātam and made the sealing of letters customary—an administrative practice that had not previously been in use (12, 19). The office of the seal remained one of the most important administrative bureaus from the caliphate of Muʿāwiya until the mid-ʿAbbāsid period (20, 22). One of the important measures devised by the Iranians in the field of correspondence—previously unknown

among the Arabs—was that during the reign of Khusraw Parvīz they perfumed parchment with saffron and rosewater to eliminate unpleasant odors. This method was revived during the Umayyad period (13).

Dīwān al-Barīd (Postal and Intelligence Service)

The origins of this bureau can be traced back to the Achaemenid period; it was later modified and reintroduced by the Sasanians (5). Its renewed use dates to the Umayyad era. When Muʿāwiya's authority as caliph became firmly established and the obstacles to his rule were removed, he sought a system that would enable him to receive news of the realm with speed. Accordingly, upon the advice of the Iranian dehqāns of Iraq and his Roman advisers, he established this bureau (20). Although the word "barīd" is Arabic, some maintain that it is an Arabized Persian term derived from "burīda-dam," since in ancient Iran the tails of postal horses were cut to distinguish them from other horses. This bureau acquired greater importance during the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān, to the extent that the caliph instructed his court chamberlains to allow the officials of the barīd to communicate with him without hindrance (14). It appears that ʿAbd al-Malik's particular attention to this bureau resulted from the expansion of the Umayyad realm and the corresponding necessity for closer surveillance of oppositional movements.

Dīwān al-Kharāj

Although kharāj and matters related to it belong to the sphere of economic studies, its discussion in this article is primarily concerned with the intellectual framework embedded in Iranian urban culture, a framework that was utilized in the economic administration of Islamic society. Accordingly, the purpose here is not to provide a detailed account of the economic model, taxation procedures, or similar technical issues, but rather to demonstrate how Iranian political-cultural concepts shaped the economic structure of the state during the Umayyad period.

The model of kharāj that was later employed within the Islamic fiscal system was, in general terms and according to explicit Islamic sources, derived from the Sasanian taxation system (23). On the basis of this model, the first dīwān was established at the recommendation of Iranians during the caliphate of ʿUmar. This dīwān initially combined both military and non-military responsibilities; however, following the establishment of the Umayyad state, fundamental changes occurred in the Dīwān al-Kharāj, such that it was divided into two separate bureaus: the Dīwān al-Kharāj and the Dīwān al-Jund. An Iranian secretary named ʿAbd Allāh ibn Darraj, who served as Muʿāwiya's scribe, played a decisive role in this transformation. It is reported that he was the first individual in the Islamic era to reclaim and rehabilitate parts of the swamp lands (Baṭāʾiḥ) of Iraq (13), an action that later served as a model for caliphs after Muʿāwiya who sought to reform land tenure and taxation. The origins of the Baṭāʾiḥ and the associated problems, however, date back to the reign of the Sasanian ruler Qubād (24).

Subsequently, under the influence of pre-Islamic Iranian culture, ʿAbd Allāh requested that the people of Kūfa present gifts to him on the occasions of Nawrūz and Mihragān (19), a custom that persisted throughout the Umayyad period, with the sole exception of the reign of ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (21). Until the time of ʿAbd al-Malik, the Dīwān al-Kharāj of Sawād and Iraq continued to operate in the Persian language; however, he ordered its translation into Arabic (13, 25). This process of Arabization was carried out by Ṣāliḥ ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān in 697 CE (19). Nevertheless, the Arabization of the dīwān did not diminish the cultural influence of the Iranians, since the bureau continued to function according to the Iranian administrative model. Moreover, the linguistic transformation did not occur instantaneously. Al-Jahshiyārī notes that as late as 742 CE, the scribes of Khurāsān were still Zoroastrians

and continued to write in Persian. It was only in that year that Yūsuf ibn ʿUmar, then governor of Iraq, wrote to Naṣr ibn Sayyār requesting that official records be transferred from Persian into Arabic (19).

During the reign of Muʿāwiya, a practice was established within the dīwān that subsequent caliphs continued to observe. Prior to Muʿāwiya, the dehqāns responsible for collecting kharāj received "ʿaṭāʾ" (stipends), but with the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty, these payments were transformed into "ujrah" (wages), justified as remuneration for services rendered to the state (7). In addition, Muʿāwiya reclaimed all lands that had belonged to the Sasanian kings and had been administered by Iranian dehqāns. Al-Yaʿqūbī records that:

"ʿAbd Allāh ibn Darraj wrote to Muʿāwiya that the dehqāns had informed him that Kisrā and the House of Kisrā possessed private estates. ʿAbd Allāh assembled the dehqāns and questioned them. They replied that the register was in Ḥulwān. He therefore ordered it to be brought, extracted from it all that belonged to Kisrā and the House of Kisrā, and designated it as Muʿāwiya's private domain." (21)

Although Iranian dehqāns, in accordance with Sasanian traditions, played a significant role in the transformations of the first Islamic century and in processes of cultural transmission, their cooperation with the Umayyad state sometimes imposed severe pressure upon their own compatriots, particularly Iranian Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It appears that they sought to revive a stratified social order in Khurāsān, an order that, within Zoroastrian cosmology, had constituted the foundation of social hierarchy in Sasanian society.

Shaban argues that:

"The Arab conquest introduced no fundamental change into the social structure of the Iranians; thus, in Merv, the social organization continued to follow the Sasanian class system, according to which the local nobility (the dehqāns) enjoyed an exceptionally privileged status, and under the terms of the treaties of surrender they preserved the authority they had exercised over the Iranian population. In fact, the dehqāns realized that if they wished to maintain their privileged position, they had no alternative but to preserve the old system." (26)

Consequently, through a form of accommodation with the Arab military and aristocracy of the Umayyad state, the dehqāns submitted to Arab authority in order to safeguard the material interests and social status they had enjoyed prior to the conquest of Iran. In this manner, the Iranian feudal elite, by outwardly embracing Islam, retained their former power and, through such stratagems and the evasion of kharāj payments, accumulated immense wealth and secured substantial political influence (27). Over time, this influence assumed a formal legal character within the structure of the ʿAbbāsid state, under institutional titles such as the vizierate, and was ultimately inherited by families such as the Barmakids and the Āl Sahl.

Conclusion

With regard to the rise of Muʿāwiya and the consolidation of Umayyad power, tribal traditions and aristocratic lineage played a more prominent role than other cultural elements. Although it is often asserted that the founder of this dynasty adopted models from Iranian culture, the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty and the transformation of the institution of the caliphate into kingship reveal fundamental substantive differences between Islamic monarchy and the Iranian concept of sovereignty. One major distinction is that in ancient Iranian culture the king of kings was regarded as the very source of power and, in accordance with the notion of divine glory, possessed a dual nature whose will was believed to exert a direct influence over existence itself—an idea that has no true parallel in the case of any of the Umayyad caliphs. Moreover, the Iranian conception of political order is intelligible only within the framework of Zoroastrian cosmology, and its association with the caliphal claim of divine vicegerency amounted to

no more than a superficial resemblance or an incomplete analogy. In addition, while religion and politics in Iranian political culture were perceived as inseparable in theory, in practice they functioned as distinct spheres; in the Islamic period, however, no such duality existed.

In examining Muʿāwiya's adoption of the Sasanian administrative system, it becomes evident that the administrative structure of the Umayyad state—particularly under Muʿāwiya—was profoundly shaped by the bureaucratic traditions of Sasanian Iran, whereas the contribution of other cultural influences in this domain was minimal.

It therefore appears that the role of Sasanian administrative culture in the establishment, formation, and overall continuity of the administrative institutions of Muʿāwiya's era is an undeniable historical reality. Consequently, the creation of the four principal dīwāns, especially the Dīwān al-Kharāj and the prevailing models associated with it, was strongly influenced by the Iranian element.

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