The Politics and Culture of an Umayyad Tribe: Conflict and Factionalism in the Early Islamic Period, by Mohammad Rihan (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014), viii + 231 pp., ISBN: 978-1-78076-564-8, £58.00 / $148.00 (hb)

Mohammad Rihan's book is an erudite examination of the history of the Arab tribe ʿĀmilah up to the end of the Umayyad period. By tracing the political trajectory of this tribe, the author aims to achieve a broader goal – "to shed some light on the history of the Umayyad tribal world" in general because, as Dr. Rihan insightfully notes, "[e]arly Islamic political history is to a large extent tribal history" (p. 1).

The book is divided into five chapters, and the political history of the tribe is discussed in three of them (Chapters 2-4), each covering a particular period. Since Chapter 1 is a methodological introduction, purporting to explain definitions and usages, while the last chapter critically surveys modern Arab scholarship about the tribe and its alleged connection to Jabal ʿĀmilah, in what follows, I will begin by surveying the three chapters discussing the political history of ʿĀmilah, followed by the concluding chapter. Because of its important methodological implications, I will leave my discussion of the first chapter to the end.

Chapter 2 looks for traces of the tribe ʿĀmilah in pre-Islamic times, including possible mentions of their name in Assyrian inscriptions and in Aramaic texts. Moving to a later historical period, the 3rd-4th centuries AD, and using epigraphic evidence, Dr. Rihan discusses the contacts between ʿĀmilah and the kingdom of Palmyra. The chapter then moves to a later period, that of the Byzantine influence over the Arabian Peninsula, and the Byzantine efforts to secure their position in this region against the encroachments of Arabs and the Sassanids. It is within this broad context that Dr. Rihan presents the role of ʿĀmilah as defenders of Byzantine interests. Because the scarcity of sources does not permit to write a dense narrative of this tribe during this period, as the author notes, he deduces "shreds of its history from the larger, more extensive history" of the Arab allies of Byzantium (p. 37), oftentimes making conjectures about ʿĀmilah based on information about other Arab tribes of the region. The chapter ends

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with a discussion of the genealogy of ʿĀmilah as presented in Arabic primary sources, but the author astutely notes that genealogical lineages in many cases reflect not actual descent but the political alignments of a tribe.

Chapter 3 examines the role of ʿĀmilah during the early decades of the Muslim conquests. Having initially met the invading armies with animosity, ʿĀmilah eventually sided with them which, according to Dr. Rihan, might have been the result of not just cultural and linguistic affinity with the advancing Muslims but also of the greater economic profit that the new alliance promised them. The author suggests that the change in the political orientation of the Syrian Arab tribes, from pro-Byzantine to pro-Muslim, might have been a (hitherto unexamined) contributing factor to the success of the early Islamic conquests.

ʿĀmilah's rise to greater importance is further detailed in Chapter 4, which traces their history under the Umayyad dynasty. Having successfully allied themselves with the new rulers, the ʿĀmilīs became a powerful military force that had direct influence on the political and military destinies of the Caliphate. Dr. Rihan provides evidence of their participation in such an important event as the Battle of Ṣiffīn, and argues that they were instrumental in subduing Berber tribes in North Africa. According to Dr. Rihan, after the fall of the Umayyads ʿĀmilah fell from importance because of their close alliance with the fallen dynasty and the inability to swiftly adapt to the new political order.

The concluding chapter critically assesses modern Arab scholarship about the alleged connection between the tribe, Jabal ʿĀmilah, and the spread of Shīʿism in the region. Dr. Rihan rejects the popular view that Jabal ʿĀmilah was Shīʿī from the early days of Muslim rule, and that the current Shīʿah in this region are the descendants of ʿĀmilah. Rather, he argues, the spread of Shīʿism here was a long process and not the result of the efforts of individual missionaries.

Let us turn to Chapter 1, entitled "The Tribe 'Amila: by Way of a Definition," and promising to explain what the author actually means by the "tribe 'Amila," but also by the term "tribe" more generally ("[W]hat is meant by 'tribe'? What do we mean exactly by the 'Amila tribe?", p. 5, cf. also p. 9). This is a welcome discussion since the study of tribal history, and early Islamic tribal history in particular, is

fraught with two problems. One is, as was noted, the scarce coverage of the early Islamic period in primary sources and another, more general problem, is the definition of the term "tribe" itself. As Dr. Rihan rightly notes, tribes are not bound by geographic borders and present more fluid forms of social organization that are prone to change with greater ease. Thus, another question to ponder is, he suggests, how different was the unit called "tribe 'Amila" in the 7th century from the one in the 8th? And the author promises a rich, theoretically informed discussion based on extensive social scientific and historical literature (e.g., n. 8, p. 160).

The discussion itself, however, contains several problems. One is that the main two questions raised by the author are left unanswered: firstly, the definition of "tribe" in general and of "'Amila" in particular; secondly, the question of historical continuity, namely, whether "the tribe 'Amila in the pre-Islamic milieu coincide[d] perfectly with the tribe 'Amila established in the Umayyad state" (p. 8). After a discussion of the several Arabic terms used in the primary sources referring to various units of social organization, and having noted that Arab authors mostly referred to ʿĀmilah as a *ḥayy* and at times as a *qabīlah*, the author leaves the reader lost as to what each of these indigenous terms might have actually meant. He does note, to be sure, that none of the terms have a clear definition, but the discussion appears to be without a clear goal and the question posed at the beginning of it, "[h]ow should we identify ['Amila]?" is left unanswered. Further, as if having clarified the matter, the author draws to a conclusion by stating that "[w]hat is clear so far is that 'Amila constituted a tribal unit (*ḥayy*) which increased or decreased in prestige, number and influence through the centuries" (pp. 11-12). Other than stating the absolute obvious – any social unit may increase or decrease in prestige, number, and influence over time –, the sentence creates an illusion of having provided an answer to a question previously posed ("What is clear so far"), which it doesn't. Firstly, the fluidity of any social unit, as noted, is pretty much a truism. Secondly, the author himself acknowledges a page earlier that a "clear definition for each group [*ḥayy* included] has not been reached" (p. 10). Stating that ʿĀmilah was called a *ḥayy*, therefore, adds nothing to our knowledge of it.

Having provided no answers to the questions initially posed, the author proceeds to ask another one: "How did 'Amila survive as a

single unit […]? What kept it together for so many centuries despite the good and bad times?" (p. 12, emphasis mine). The way these questions are posed is one problem, the way the author tries to answer them is another.

Using the term "single unit" and stating that something "kept it together," and then asking a question of a second order (just *how* was it kept together?), implies that the questions of identity and historical continuity (raised by the author himself, p. 5) have been successfully solved. But they haven't, as I already discussed. Furthermore, the causes of this continuity that the author proposes, and the authorities he uses to uphold his explanations, raise further questions.

Several causes to the survival of ʿĀmilah as one unit are noted (not all of them are explicitly said to be causes, but their successive listing following the question posed suggests they are implied as such). To begin with, the author states that "[i]t is with Ibn Khaldun that we need to start searching for answers" (p. 12). The mere fact of calling upon this medieval thinker as an expert and theoretician of all things Arab is already problematic, an unfounded Orientalist trope.[1] Indeed, the natural-scientific *cum* theological argument of Ibn Khaldūn explaining a person's respect for one's blood ties (*ʿaṣabiyyah*, p. 13) has no explanatory power for our purposes. As if to rectify this, Dr. Rihan then states that "[t]he fact that tribal units held together by group feeling (*ʿasabiyyah*) can survive is endorsed by *modern scholarship*" (as if assuming that the notion of *aṣabiyyah* has been successfully explained, which it has not, p. 13, emphasis mine), and in support he calls upon none other than Robertson Smith. However, the examples from the latter's *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, first published in 1885, provide no clarification beyond stating that it was a feature of *ḥayy* to live and to act together, that they had a common name, and that they formed the basic social unity among Arabs. Elsewhere in his book, Smith avers that because the word *ḥayy* occurs both in Arabic and Hebrew, "the group founded on unity of blood is a most ancient feature of Semitic society."[2]

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1 In Aziz Al-Azmeh's pithy formulation, "Ibn Khaldūn … is … taken as the unchallenged sociological and cultural interpreter of medieval North Africa and much of medieval and modern Arab-Islamic culture …," *Ibn Khaldūn: An Essay in Reinterpretation* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003), vii.

2 W. Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Cambridge: University Press, 1885), 40.

The author is on firmer ground in his discussion of kinship and descent which help establish and maintain social ties in a group that is not circumscribed geographically (pp. 14-17). Still, just how exactly, or whether at all, this general discussion applies to ʿĀmilah is mot made sufficiently clear (other than stating that they manipulated their genealogy for political purposes, p. 17).

After a short discussion of the usefulness of maintaining ties with neighboring tribes (what the author calls "neighborliness," pp. 17-18), Dr. Rihan provides what in his view is another element "upon which the tribal structure is based," namely, *muruwwah* (p. 18), a polyvalent term that denoted in pre-Islamic Arabic a certain set of Bedouin "manly" virtues. The short paragraph that purports to explain *muruwwah*, however, is problematic. Firstly, it takes this emic category for granted – as existing out there in the world and not a term denoting a set of values prized in the society in question (in other words, it mistakes a *value* for a *fact*). It moreover uses what one may call "insider reports" to establish its existence, namely, the poetry of ʿAdī ibn al-Riqāʿ, who praised the *muruwwah* of his tribe: the fact that the poet of a tribe should praise its virtues, and that this praise is no evidence of the actual existence of such virtues, needs no elaboration. The main problem with the paragraph, however, is the explanatory power accorded to this category: while the author does not openly state what *muruwwah* has to do with answering the central question opening this sub-chapter, the reader is left with the impression that it is one of the elements, along with the previously listed kinship/descent and "neighborliness," that enabled ʿĀmilah to persists as a "single unit."

The chapter concludes with two sections discussing the economic activities of nomadic Arabs in pre-Islamic times, ʿĀmilah included, and their tribal hierarchy. It ends with a paragraph that comes closest to defining, finally, what the tribe ʿĀmilah is, but still falls short of the mark. Having rightly noted that the term "tribe" itself is a category often used by sedentary people to denote nomads, marking them as "different" (an insight that, one wishes, were elaborated earlier on and at greater length), Dr. Rihan then proceeds to define it as "a *group* in the *technical sense*: it has maintained permanent existence; it has a name; there are established and accepted principles for membership; and there are norms which permit and regulate its distinctive existence" (p. 23, emphasis mine). While the last two

statements, about the principles of membership and the norms that regulate a group's existence, could make for a viable definition, still, they are not substantiated anywhere in the book. But it is the first two definitions of this "group in a technical sense" (just what is the *technical* meaning of *group*, one wonders) that are completely misleading: stating that something is a group *because* (and I take the colon in that sentence to imply causation) it has a *name* is not an explanation. (Thus, because "Muslims" in the US have a name, this doesn't mean they are a "group.") And stating that it is such because it has *maintained existence* is nothing but a circular argument. Ultimately, the failure to provide answers to the questions raised and to successfully define that which is studied in the book, leaves the reader wondering how much of the historical narrative that follows in the subsequent chapters refers to ʿĀmilah as one entity.

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Mushegh Asatryan

University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta-Canada
Email: mushegh.asatryan@ucalgary.ca