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## THE ROLE OF PERSIAN BUREAUCRATS IN THE SHUUBIYYA MOVEMENT: EARLY ABBASID PERIOD

### Abstract

The racist policies and practices of many Umayyad caliphs caused serious crises which would undermine the Islamic social structure. The non-Arab (the *Mawali*) peoples of the empire, who were victims of the difficult circumstances in this period, had been exposed to unfair and discriminatory laws on the basis of race due to these caliphs' chauvinist attitudes. The transition of the caliphate from the Umayyads to the Abbasids would enable the *Mawali* elements to react against the Arabism. In the middle of the eighth century, the Islamic world witnessed the genesis of a literary and scholarly movement which would be called as the *Shuubiyya*. The representatives of the movement (the *Shuubis*), the majority of whom were Persians, reacted to Arab racism with their works and studies in various fields such as literature, history and translation. One of the two tasks of the current paper is to determine the impact of Persian statesmen and high-ranking officials on the development of the *Shuubiyya* movement. The other is to scrutinize and compare modern researchers' different arguments about the ultimate target of the *Shuubis*. In the light of present knowledge and findings, the conclusion which this study reaches is that the *Shuubiyya*, whose Persian supporters played an active role in the spread of its doctrine, was an apolitical movement.





## İRANLI BÜROKRATLARIN ŞUUBİYYE HAREKETİNDEKİ ROLÜ: ERKEN ABBÂSÎ DÖNEMİ

### Öz

Pek çok Emevî halifesinin ırkçı politika ve uygulamaları, İslâm toplum yapısını sarsacak ciddi krizlere yol açmıştı. Bu dönemdeki zor koşulların mağdurları olan imparatorluğun Arap olmayan (*Mevâlî*) halkları, söz konusu halifelerin şovenist tutumlarından dolayı, ırk temelinde adil olmayan ve ayrımcı kanunlara maruz kalmışlardı. Hilafetin Emevîlerden Abbâsilere geçişi, *Mevâlî* unsurların Arabizme reaksiyon göstermesine olanak tanıyacaktı. Sekizinci yüzyılın ortalarında, İslâm dünyası, *Şuûbiyye* olarak isimlendirilecek, edebî ve ilmî bir akımın doğuşuna tanıklık etti. Çoğunluğu Fars asıllı olan akımın temsilcileri (*Şuûbiler*) edebiyat, tarih, tercüme vb. alanlardaki eserleri ve çalışmalarıyla Arap ırkçılığına tepki gösterdiler. Mevcut araştırmanın iki ödevinden biri, İranlı devlet adamlarının ve üst düzey memurların *Şuûbiyye* hareketinin ilerleme kaydetmesindeki etkisini tespit etmektir. Diğeri ise, günümüz araştırmacılarının *Şuûbilerin* nihai hedefi hakkındaki farklı argümanlarını tetkik ve mukayese etmektir. Mevcut bilgi ve bulgular ışığında, çalışma, İranlı taraftarlarının öğretisinin yayılmasında etkin bir rol oynadığı *Şuûbiyye*'nin apolitik bir akım olduğu sonucuna ulaşmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Irkçılık, *Şuûbiyye* Akımı, *Şuûbiler*, İranlı Bürokratlar, Abbâsî Dönemi.

### Introduction

Even in their early years, the Abbasids (AD 750-1258), who rose to power in the mid-eighth century, were open to the impacts of Persian culture and Sasanian civilization. With the aid of the *Mawali* (non-Arab Muslims), they managed to overthrow the Umayyad dynasty in the wake of the Khurasan (or Abbasid) Revolution. In other words, the Abbasids were indebted to those peoples for their support during the process of the Revolution. For this reason, the founders and/or first caliphs of the new Islamic government followed policies in favor of the *Mawali*, even though they were of Arab origin (Fariq, 1962: 18). However, it must be emphasized that the Persians, particularly in the early years of the Caliphate, had a special position among all of other *Mawali* communities due to certain historical phenomena. Needless to say, it is quite difficult to shed light on socio-politic and socio-cultural events that took place during that time without an understanding of these phenomena.

The region of Khurasan which was the center point for Abbasid propaganda against the Umayyads was a part of the Sasanid empire before the Islamic conquests. Moreover, it seems that the ancient Iranian legacy was still vividly alive even when the Abbasids struggled for revolution in the area. After the establishment of the caliphate, some critical decisions related to the administrative organization enhanced the Persian effect on the ruling class. For instance, Ja'far al-Mansur (754-75), the second caliph, had selected land situated on the bank





of the Tigris river in order to build a new city (Baghdad), which then became the capital of the state. This meant that the Abbasid dynasty was now more vulnerable to Persian traditions, customs and values because this land was an old Sasanid settlement (Aykaç, 1993: 43-4). As a matter of fact, changes in the social life of subsequent years proved that the lifestyle habits of the Persian nation quickly penetrated into the Caliphate palace. Their foods, beverages, clothes, games, etc. became more and more popular among the Arab statesmen and high-ranking bureaucrats (Demirayak, 2021: 24-5). The intense interactions with Persians were attracting the Abbasids into the Persians' cultural orbit and this was no less important than in the transfer of governmental institutions. The importation of customs and manners may have paved the way for the imitation of the Sasanian state model. However, the controversy which will be discussed in the following sections compels us to concentrate on the bureaucratic class rather than cultural developments.

It is well known that Persians also provided a talented human resource for the rulers, who employed them as civil servants. The information presented by many studies have clearly demonstrated that the historical experiences and characteristic abilities in statecraft were handed down to them by their ancestors. Certainly, most of the Abbasid caliphs were quite aware of their bureaucratic capabilities; therefore, they did not hesitate to appoint Persian officials to the most critical posts in the administrative organization. Despite some serious dangers, a lot of offices such as *wazir* (chief counselor), *sirdar* (commander-in-chief), *wali* (governor) and *katib* (secretary) were filled by Persians in a short time and thus the Persian hegemony over management, bureaucracy, the army and even intellectual life began with the same process (Garthwaite, 2011: 115; Zaidan, 2012: 404-5). As time went on and the influence of the Persian identity expanded, the Arab element within the empire was melting rapidly. In addition to that, the historical dominance of Persian statesmen in the field of management and bureaucracy can be evaluated in an even broader context. The Abbasid epoch was only a starting point for them. That is to say, they went on to obtain important positions under the rule of various Islamic empires, sultanates or dynasties which reigned in the medieval Middle East (Safa, 2002: 5). The same phenomenon enables us to find the most persuasive explanation for the question: "How was the Sasanian type of government structure conveyed to different points in the Near East?" Nonetheless, numerous experiences in the history of Islam would indicate that Persian bureaucrats could become a potential threat for both rulers and particular social and ethnic communities.

From another aspect, the period in question marked the disappearance of racist policies and practices towards the *Mawali*. Unlike the Umayyads, the attitude of the early Abbasid rulers towards the non-Arab Muslims did not trigger civil unrest or public opposition on the basis of race at all. The racial conflicts occurring during this process were between the *Mawali* communities and the Arabs; the government did not play a part in those conflicts. Furthermore, the caliphs gave these peoples a wide range of freedom and a series of rights





which had previously been constrained by the Umayyad regime. They could now express their own thoughts and opinions without any restrictions. It was under these conditions that the *Shuubiyya* movement emerged as one of the first literary currents in Islamic history. The leading representatives and many proponents of the movement were non-Arabs, especially Persians who had been crushed under unfair and heavy restrictions imposed by Umayyad racism. These were known as the *Shuubis*. Actually, in the light of historical records, it would not be wrong to say that the pioneer *Shuubis* began using poems as a weapon against the Arabism even in the last days of the Umayyads. Even so, they had to keep silent until the collapse of this dynasty because of the rigid despotism. At the beginning of the history of *Shuubiyya*, the basic ideology they espoused was that all believers are equal and racism is contrary to Islamic teachings. References to religious principles must have been the best way for criticizing the Arab chauvinism of the Umayyad caliphs. Yet, in later periods the supporters of a new sub-group or, more correctly, fraction whose views deviated from the essential idea came into being within the *Shuubiyya* movement, as has been the case with many other ideological movements throughout history. To take revenge for the oppression of Arabism, the *Shuubis* of the new generation violently defended the claim that Ajam peoples (non-Arabs) are superior to Arabs, particularly in terms of historical past, culture and civilization. No doubt, just as Arabism was contrary to the Koran and the hadith, Ajam racism was a contradiction of the same divine sources. As for the target of the present paper, it is to focus on two aspects of the *Shuubiyya* controversy. First of all, we will point out some Persian statesmen and/or officers who played an active role in strengthening the ideas of the *Shuubiyya* during the period under discussion. Secondly, it will be tried to analyze the arguments concerning the main purpose of the *Shuubis*. We hope that the article will make a modest contribution to the bibliography on the *Shuubiyya*.

## 1. Persian Patronage and *Shuubi* Bureaucrats

There is considerable evidence showing that many members of the movement had striking common features. To begin with, these people were reputed to be not only poets or authors but also officials or civil servants. As far as we have learned from some sources and studies, none of them were outside the Abbasid bureaucratic system or palace. Another typical quality of the *Shuubis* of this period, as has already been mentioned, is that those who made up the majority of the proponents and were the most famous ones had descended from the ancient Persian people. And even, some extremist figures introduced themselves as descendants of the Chosroes (kings of Sasanid). Lastly, the proponents of the movement, at least a remarkable number of them, were under the protection of a powerful family, *wazir* or commander. The patrons who stood up for the *Shuubiyya* ideology and supported the activities of its representatives financially, as might be predicted, were also of Persian lineage. At this point, an observation regarding the Persian patrons' approach to the movement can be





mentioned briefly. As one historian has suggested, they had to secretly patronise the *Shuubis*; otherwise, the Arab caliphs would have worried about their aims. The high-ranking posts they gained forced them to adopt such a method. According to the same evaluation, these Ajam statesmen (Persians) were the people behind the influential *Shuubi* scholars and men of letters (Ahmad Amin, 2012: 67-8). By putting forward this argument, he has indirectly stated his own thoughts on their true intention against the Abbasid dynasty. What is more important is that the citation has also stressed that – whether secretly or not - the *Shuubis* were maintained and encouraged by strong and wealthy families or men to continue their literary activities. As an undeniable fact, no scientific, artistic or any other cultural movement can acquire continuity unless a government or an aristocratic group promotes it. In this sense, the *Shuubiyya* is not an exceptional example for the historical reality in question.

The first Abbasid century witnessed the rise and downfall of a prominent *wazir* family whose ethnic origin, status and ideals were completely suitable for the primary goals of the movement. Thanks to the Barmakid patronage, the Persian intellectuals who praised the glory and dignity of their ancient civilization at the expense of the Arabs gathered together around a common mission. In fact, the family can be considered as an archaic version of the Medicis. Until they were eliminated by the caliph Harun al-Rashid (786-809), the post of *wazir* was under the monopoly of the Barmakids. It will obviously be a misinterpretation to see a coincidence that the number of the Persian officers in the bureaucracy increased dramatically during the years they dominated the Abbasid court. As a matter of fact, the information about their power at that time (Zaidan, 2004: 441-3; Özdemir, 2019: 292-4) has corroborated the point that the Barmakids were very active in both the government and palace. Apart from the political and bureaucratic hegemony, a cultural campaign which aggravated the racial tension between Persians and Arabs was launched by the same family. All intellectual works within the scope of the campaign served to revitalize and disseminate the value system of the ancient Iranians. Presumably, many scholars who participated in these activities made an intense effort to produce new works and to translate old sources (books, epistles, texts etc.) from Persian into Arabic to achieve this purpose. Perhaps it should be mentioned again that these intellectuals were at the same time employed as scribes, copyists or secretaries, namely members of the civil bureaucracy. Spreading the cultural elements of Persian civilization may have been regarded by the Barmakids as a part of their duties. Of course, the family urged the poets, writers and learned men to do extensive literary and scientific studies which could attest that Persian history is more glorious than that of the Arabs, and it appears that various offices, by assigning Persians and men from other *Mawali* nations, were used as an instrument to accomplish their purpose (Kılıçlı, 1986: 178). Nevertheless, it does not seem easy to determine the dominant motive for this kind of intellectual effort. Knowing whether the Barmakids' basic motivation to widen the sphere of Persian culture was related to racial issues or political goals would also be instructive for understanding a number of power struggles occurring at the time





The Role of Persian Bureaucrats in The Shuubiyya Movement: Early Abbasid Period

when the Abbasid Caliphate reached the zenith of its management organization and bureaucratic system. Apart from that, there are some noteworthy theories attempting to clarify the reasons and/or impulses behind this campaign. One of them draws attention to the strong inclinations of the Barmakids to awaken Persian nationalism. Accordingly, the cultural invasion they initiated was a result of their nationalist feelings at the level of fanaticism (Kılıçlı, 1986: 178). We are rather dubious about the theories that the roots of nationalism can be traced back to the pre-industrial era. Therefore, in our opinion, quite clear and strong indications are needed for verifying the presence of nationalist tendencies in the medieval Islamic world. Then again, it is possible to state without hesitation that a systematic programme towards the revival of the Persian traditions corresponded utterly with the *Shuubis'* expectations and hopes. What we have suggested is that the Barmakid patronage was one of the most determinant factors which led to the growth of the *Shuubiyya* ideology. It must be added here that the most eminent figures of the movement such as Allan al-Shuubi and Sahl b. Harun, whose studies held a vital place in the *Shuubiyya* literature worked in the service of the Barmakids (Kılıçlı, 1986: 179). In short, while on the one hand the members of this family induced the intellectuals to write literary and scholarly works on the splendid past of their ancestors and sponsored them for these activities, on the other, they contributed directly to shaping the conception of the *Shuubiyya*.

Even after the close of the Barmakid era, certain chaotic incidents brought about the emergence of new masters and/or financiers for the *Shuubis*. The death of Harun al-Rashid was followed by the hostility which broke out between his two sons, al-Amin (809-13) and al-Mamun (813-33), in competition for the caliphate. During the reign of al-Amin, his verdict towards the abolishment of the *waliahd* (heir to the caliphate) status of the latter, as it is well known by medieval historians, caused a fierce battle which also involved two ethnic elements, Persians and Arabs; in contrast to al-Amin (whose mother was an Arab), al-Mamun's mother was of Persian origin. Tahir ibn Husayn, the Persian commander of al-Mamun's troops, played a crucial role in the wars of between the brothers. As a distinguished general, he gained critical victories against al-Amin's army (Safa, 2002: 6-7) and the future of both al-Mamun and the *Shuubiyya* were affected greatly by his military successes. al-Mamun became the new caliph and with his sovereignty, the Persians regained control of the state mechanism. As for the *Shuubis*, in this new period they evidently had no difficulty finding new patrons, generous grants, rewards or other financial supports. It has been recorded that Tahir ibn Husayn was one of these patrons. In the light of this information, the famous commander's interest in the *Shuubiyya* movement can be discerned from the examples demonstrating that he granted precious rewards to the authors who were enemies of Arabs and wrote works in order to insult the Arabs. The abovementioned Allan al-Shuubi, for instance, had received thirty thousand dirhams as a prize from Tahir ibn Husayn, since he did a study about the faults of the Arab tribes (Ahmad Amin, 2012: 68; Soyupek, 2015: 11). Obviously, Tahir ibn Husayn's services,





which enabled al-Mamun to take the caliphate, must have made him a respected man in the eyes of the supporters of the *Shuubiyya*. In the days of the caliph, ideological opponents of Arabism found great favor and attained considerable opportunities for employment in the management departments (Zaidan, 2012: 428-30). If looked at from this aspect, there is adequate cause to assume that the first years of the period in question – in other words, until al-Mamun withdrew his support from the Persian element - was the golden age of the *Shuubiyya*.

Some mention of al-Fadl ibn Sahl within this context might be useful with regard to patronage. Besides Tahir ibn Husayn, another notable figure backing al-Mamun against his brother was al-Fadl ibn Sahl. Moreover, his effort and assistance for the caliph's ascension to the Abbasid throne may also have much more decisive than that of anyone else. In the end, al-Fadl ibn Sahl, whom the caliph had assigned to the highest office (*wazir*) in the wake of his rise to power as head of the Caliphate, became the most influential man of the empire till his death in 818 (Yıldız, 1995: 275). Like many high-ranking officials of that time, the new *wazir* was a Persian and his presence at the center of the administration, in connection with al-Mamun's inclinations, was also convenient for infiltrating Persians into the bureaucratic circles. However, in the subsequent years some serious upheavals and revolts which would drastically change the equilibrium in the internal-political structure arose from the new conjunctural situation. In addition to this, the murder of al-Fadl ibn Sahl was most probably a result of this chaotic atmosphere. Concerning the intellectual personality of the *wazir*, it can be said that he was a well-educated and sophisticated person. Moreover, his key role behind the scholarly and cultural improvements happening during the period of al-Mamun has been significantly stressed (Yıldız, 1995: 276). Historians studying the *wazir's* life, as far as we can tell, have discovered no historical documents to determine whether he was a follower and/or sympathiser of the *Shuubiyya* movement or not. Despite this, it is possible to deduce from al-Fadl ibn Sahl's political attitude, approach and tendency as pro-Persian that the *Shuubis* freely carried out their own propaganda activities throughout the years when he held the post of *wazir*.

Such a conjuncture moulded by the political and social circumstances of the era under consideration allowed a considerable number of officers to join the *Shuubiyya* movement. Among these officers, the movement found one of its most ardent adherents in the person of Allan al-Shuubi. Just his *nisba* (al-Shuubi) is sufficient data to claim that he identified with the movement. Apart from the knowledge that he was Persian, the exact date and place of his birth are unknown. In the reign of Harun al-Rashid and al-Mamun, Allan served as a *mustansih* (copyist) at Bayt al-Hikmah as well as being a genealogist (Goldziher, 1966: 189; Kılıçlı, 1986: 190). He, as it is noted before, composed a book (*al-Maydan fi al-Mathalib*) to humiliate certain Arab tribes and clans such as Quraysh, Banu Taym, Banu Makhzum by referring to their defects and flaws (Ahmad Amin, 2012: 73). Undoubtedly, the aim and content of the work





The Role of Persian Bureaucrats in The Shuubiyya Movement: Early Abbasid Period

have explicitly reflected Allan's belonging to the *Shuubiyya* and his hatred for the Arab race as much as his *nisba*. Lastly, it is understood from scanty information that this extremist *Shuubi*, who had dualistic opinions, was a *zindiq* (heretic) (Abu al-Faraj, 2008: XX/28).

Said ibn Humayd, who has been called one of leading advocates of the movement in the literature is another example which should be mentioned within this framework. Said, asserting that he was a descendant of Persian kings (Ahmad Amin, 2012: 72; Polatoğlu, 2022: 130-1), was born and raised in Baghdad (Abu al-Faraj, 2008: XVIII/111) and passed away in 854 or 864 (Goldziher, 1966: 152; Kılıçlı, 1986: 201-2). Particular traits Said had were signs to indicate his versatility: He was a poet and *katib*, and in connection with these features, he could use words impressively. Therefore, it is not surprising to find out that he was appointed to the *diwan al-rasail* (department of correspondence) (Kılıçlı, 1986: 201-2; Polatoğlu, 2022: 130-1). Said ibn Humayd revealed his hostility to the Arabs through his works just as other representatives of the pro-Persian propaganda did (Ahmad Amin, 2012: 72). As a matter of fact, the names of these works (for instance, *The Superiority of the Ajam over the Arabs and Their Pride*) have helped modern researchers to detect his *Shuubi* identity. A noteworthy report about him is that Said's father, namely Humayd, was accused of being both a *zindiq* and *Shuubi* (Abu al-Faraj, 2008: XVIII/111). So long as the information is not refuted, any observer can put forward that Humayd had an impact on the shaping of his son's thoughts based almost entirely on the Ajam chauvinism and/or the anti-Arabism.

A distinguished bureaucrat of the period, Sahl ibn Harun must definitely be added to the list showing those who were both Persian officials and defenders of the *Shuubiyya* ideology. Dastmaysan, a settlement located within the vicinity of Basra, was his birthplace. Like many other *Shuubis*, Sahl was of Persian lineage, and there were also close similarities between his qualities and theirs in the fields of literature and bureaucracy. In one sense, being a poet, man of letters, *katib* and an expert in the Pahlavi language have underlined the diversity of Sahl's career. While Harun al-Rashid was on the throne, he had found a place in the Abbasid court and then, was elevated to the office of chief *katib* in the service of the *wazir* Yahya ibn Khalid, a rather powerful member of the Barmakid family (Kılıçlı, 1986: 197; Azimli, 2009: 319). Although the Caliphate experienced a serious political crisis and throne struggle in the following years, this situation did not adversely affect his professional status. Indeed, in the caliph al-Mamun's rule, he appeared as the director of the most productive science center and library of the Abbasid epoch (Bayt al-Hikmah) (Azimli, 2009: 319; Polatoğlu, 2022: 379). *Shuubi* is among the adjectives describing the traits Sahl had. Moreover, he has been introduced as the author of many works in the genre of *mathalib*.<sup>1</sup> In order to prove Sahl's sympathy for the *Shuubiyya*, attention can be drawn to his famous epistle on stinginess. In this letter he had

<sup>1</sup> The books written to satirize the Arabs.





praised the stinginess that was one of the characteristic features of the Persians and criticized the generosity which was considered a virtue by the Arabs (Ahmad Amin, 2012: 72-3). In brief, the present knowledge about Sahl ibn Harun makes it impossible for investigators not to suspect his tendencies towards the movement.

To extend the list by citing the names of other *Shuubis* whom a caliph, *wazir* or high-ranking bureaucrat invested with an official duty is, of course, possible. Abu Ishaq al-Mutawakkili and Ishaq ibn Salama (Kılıçlı, 1986: 151-3, 205) sharing certain typical attributes with the abovementioned *Shuubis* can be evaluated as other examples. Once again, if it is necessary to enhance the instances illuminating the historical reality that many outstanding members of the bureaucratic class of the first Abbasid century consisted of the Persian *Shuubis*, the name of Aban ibn Abd al-Hamid (d. 815/6), who was a *katib*, poet and translator as well as being characterized as a supporter of the *Shuubiyya* and a *zindiq* because of his thoughts (Polatoğlu, 2022: 112), can also be mentioned. Needless to say, it is beyond a doubt that all the representatives of this movement are not just those whose names have been pointed out so far and who can be seen as an elite class in terms of socio-cultural and social status. But, at this point, further examples would just be repetitious rather than verifying the reality of the historical phenomenon under discussion.

Finally, before passing on to the next heading, we need to remark on a critical aspect of the issue. Acute attention is not required to perceive the connection between the *Shuubiyya* and heretic groups such as the *zanadiqa* (plural of *zindiq*) who embraced teachings relying on dualism. As far as it is understood from the data given in some studies (al-Duri, 2020: 109), the resurrection of such heresies, which are totally against Islamic doctrine, coincided with the genesis of the *Shuubiyya* idea. The same historical situation explains why the writers of the primary sources had stuck the label of *zindiq* on the *Shuubis*. Similarly, that must be reason why these heterodox beliefs had been evaluated as one of the hazards of the *Shuubiyya* by several renowned historians like Gibb (1982: 69). Thus, they have stressed that the movement was a grave threat not only for Arabism but also Islam. However, according to the results of certain researches, it is unclear whether the label of *zindiq* was based on truth or false charge. The case of Salih ibn Abd al-Quddûs (d. 783) should be mentioned to call attention to this uncertainty. Salih, a poet, man of letters and theologian of Persian origin, was executed after having been accused of being *zindiq* in the days of al-Mahdi (775-85), who gave great importance to prosecuting heretic groups (al-Duri, 2020: 111), or his son, Harun al-Rashid. Nonetheless, reasonable doubts and important findings have been presented by a survey of the cause for his death penalty. Within this framework, it has been suggested that Salih was killed due to political motives rather than religious reasons. When Salih's poems are taken into account it is difficult to conclude that he was a heretic, the same survey has maintained. In contrast to the works of *zanadiqa*, the moral principles and basic values of Islam had been advocated in his poems. Salih did not accept the racist theory based on the superiority of the





Arabs; on the contrary, he was a *Shuubi*, who defended the conception of equality (probably, he belonged to the first generation or fraction of the movement, namely the followers of equality (the *ahl al-taswiya*). He must have been considered as an opponent of the Arab regime by the caliph on account of his opinions and ideas. Consequently, the survey in question claimed that Salih had been exposed to the accusation of *zindiq* and in fact, was sentenced to death because he was an influential representative of the *Shuubiyya* (Maraz, 2020). No doubt, this striking case warns investigators that they should be cautious about the descriptions of the *Shuubis*. It also provides substantial clues to discern how the Abbasid rule perceived the movement and its targets. Obviously, the worries of al-Mahdi –or Harun al-Rashid- about Salih ibn Abd al-Quddûs have indirectly reflected the caliphate's suspicion that the *Shuubiyya* can be a danger for the continuity of the regime. As we shall see in the following section, such a possibility has led to differences of opinion about the essential goal of the movement.

## 2. A Discussion: The Purpose of *Shuubi* Bureaucrats

The Abbasids inherited a powerful state whose boundaries were steadily expanded from the earlier period of the Islamic caliphate onwards. As this state evolved into a world empire, they naturally must have felt the need to establish new governmental bureaus and/or to restore existing ones in accordance with an imperial ruling system. Until the advent of Islam, Arabs had almost never ruled a cosmopolitan – that is to say, *multiethnic* and *multicultural* - social structure or managed a complicated bureaucratic mechanism. Actually, the racial and social strife between the *Mawali* communities and the Arabs occurring in the Umayyad era resulted from such inexperience, along with other factors such as tribalism. Furthermore, the extreme chauvinist attitudes and the arrogance of most Umayyad caliphs considerably prevented them from authorizing the Ajam elements, notably the Persians, to conduct the administrative and bureaucratic affairs of an ever-growing empire. The Abbasid rulers, unlike the previous ones, had significantly abandoned the mentality of ethnic superiority and, by applying a more rational method, preferred to furnish men from the *Mawali* with authority in the field of management. And thus, the activities of Persian statesmen in the rule of the empire and the penetration of old Sasanid institutions and traditions into the territories of the caliphate began in the real sense.

Then again, it should be said that Muslim rulers of the pre-Abbasid age had started to transfer many *diwans* (government departments) and installed practices from the Sasanian state tradition. For instance, the Sasanid type financial, juridical and postal (*barid*) organizations, which were so important for a centralized administration structure, were already refunctionalized before the Abbasid epoch (Altungök, 2014: 447-50). Even the Umayyads, whose excessive fanaticism towards Arabism is beyond any doubt, were no longer indifferent to the customs of ancient Iranians in the last years of the dynasty. One of the caliphs of this era, Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik (724-43) approved the imitation of the protocol and





ceremonial rules of old Persian palaces. Contemporary observers in the days of the same caliph witnessed that Persian texts on politics had been translated into Arabic (Lapidus, 2002: 145-6). Although these endeavors towards translation activities are rather weak and limited when they are compared to the comprehensive and systematic studies of the Abbasids, they deserve to be stressed because they were the first attempts in this field.

It seems that the Abbasids had plausible reasons for intensifying efforts to translate written works from Persian into their language. Taking the administrative mentality and usages of an universal empire as a guide must have been above all a necessity for the Abbasids. In this sense, for them, the Sasanian state was one of the best examples. This was because not only had the Sasanians built a great empire and civilization but also the areas where they had dominated till the mid-seventh century were now controlled by the Abbasid caliphate. The requirement to follow an empire model crystallizes the motivation behind the adoption and revival of the Persians' ideology of rule and concept of sovereignty (Larsson, 2005: 367; Garthwaite, 2011: 110). Additionally, what the Muslim caliphs of that time needed was, of course, an army of scholars who are able to introduce the cultural and civilized elements of these people through their studies. The caliphate did not lack men of letters, translators, experts, intellectuals etc. for such a crucial duty and, as seen above, the ruling class as a whole did not neglect to encourage them. As an unavoidable result of such a campaign, the Persian identity was gradually outweighing the Arab identity – so much so that for some high-ranking bureaucrats in the reign of al-Mamun, anyone who wanted to be a *katib* had to learn Iranian history, sciences, customs, etc. (Safa, 2002: 39). As for the *Shuubis'* contribution, it was a major determinant of the development of the ideological and cultural programme of the Abbasid governments. Moreover, it can be asserted without hesitation that they became volunteer soldiers of this campaign since the revival of the Persian traditions would at the same time serve their own purposes. In this process, translation was a particularly efficient method used to make propaganda for the *Shuubiyya*. The main intention of the *Shuubi* translators and authors, as might be expected, was to praise and to exalt exaggeratedly the Persian value system rather than to present knowledge about these people objectively. Apart from that, they, according to a distinguished investigation, did not refrain from writing books containing untrue narratives and/or adding apocryphal stories to their works (Kılıçlı, 1986: 175-6). On the other hand, the *Shuubis'* studies, in spite of their negative sides, paved the way for some advancements in the world of thought, science and culture during the Abbasid Renaissance. One of them is that the idea that Arabic should be the language of culture was brought into question. Such an argument triggered a counter-argument; the opponents of the *Shuubiyya* movement strove to implement the program turning Arabic into a language of culture with philological studies. In the end, these heated debates forced the representatives of both sides to concentrate on the fields of culture, linguistics, etc. and thereby led to an increase in the number of books, epistles or other written texts in these disciplines. Last but not least, the





Persian works which had belonged to the pre-Islamic age were saved from being lost thanks to the research within the scope of the *Shuubiyya* (Bozkurt, 2016: 196-7).

At first glance, all of these activities conducted by the followers of the movement and, more generally, their ideal forming the management organization of the empire in accordance with the Persian traditions do not seem incompatible with the expectations of the caliphs. What the *Shuubis* aimed at, however, is not clear enough. As was indicated earlier, in certain circumstances, some caliphs were seriously annoyed by their existence. This aspect of the issue has been converted into a subtle problem in the scientific papers of modern historians. In other words, they have put forward different hypotheses to answer the following question: What was the real purpose of the *Shuubi kuttab* (plural of *katib*)/officials? These hypotheses can be split into two basic categories in order to summarize them. The first one represents the supposition that the *Shuubis'* target was to remould the caliphate's institutions on the Sasanian example. The other view has assumed that the essential plan of the movement was to destroy the Abbasid state (or the Arab regime) in order to build a new Persian government. No historian or social scientist, as far as is known, had suggested the first argument before Gibb. In his famous paper on the issue, he defended convincingly the opinion that the secretaries (*kuttab*), who recognized the doctrine of *Shuubiyya*, did not wish to overthrow the Islamic caliphate. Gibb also stressed that there is no evidence to support the opposite opinion. According to him, they intended to reshape the political and social institutions of the empire based on the installed practices of Sasanians (1982: 66). Gibb had actually put forward the conviction at issue in order to criticize Goldziher's theory that the *Shuubiyya* revitalized the nationalist consciousness and ideas of Persians (1966: 144). Subsequently, Gibb's argument would be fully or partly shared and/or referred to again and again by many investigators. Mottahedeh, for instance, in one of his articles, would mention most *Shuubis* as apolitical and would describe them as "faithful servants of the caliphate". According to his judgment on the discussion, the *Shuubiyya* was essentially a literary controversy and its followers did not aim at establishing a new regime (1976: 162). At this point it is not necessary to overemphasize that the hypothesis Gibb argued was approved by the latter. Apart from Mottahedeh, several other researchers have agreed on the *Shuubis'* purpose with the same approach. One of them, Enderwitz overtly concurred with Gibb's assessment (1997: 514). A similar attitude to the subject can be observed in an article by Savran, which was published more recently (2007: 43). Another matter which may be pointed out here is that the opinion is neither confirmed nor rejected completely by certain authors. The conclusion Norris reached was an expression of this. Nearly thirty five years ago, he had drawn attention to the argument under consideration in his academic study about the *Shuubiyya* and then, he expressed his own suspicion with the following the statement: "It is clear, though, that the movement was not confined to secretaries, but was wider, nor can its aims be so clearly defined" (1990: 31).





On the part of those who have claimed the exact opposite of the abovementioned hypothesis, on the other hand, the tendency to interpret the struggle to Persianize the administrative structure of the Abbasid state as a threat to the caliphate has been discerned clearly. In this connection, the Persian officers in general and the *Shuubis* in particular are portrayed as people who sought to exterminate Arab rule and revive Persian sovereignty. Gurgi Zaidan's remarks on the Persians, especially those who were powerful and active in the bureaucratic organization can be regarded as an example of such a description. For Zaidan, they had pursued their goal of Persianizing the government since the Umayyad age. He also believed that the Persians, as a further step, were waiting for an opportunity to found a new Persian state even after the Abbasids had risen to power (2012: 430-1). His conviction about them probably included the *Shuubis* because the firmest supporters of the movement consisted largely of Persian bureaucrats. There are, of course, many arguments which directly evaluate the target of the *Shuubis* within the same perspective. According to a study reflecting such a standpoint, at the time of the Abbasids the secret movements which strove to destroy the Muslim Arab state or the religion of Islam could be called *Shuubiyya*. The same study claimed that a striking aspect of the *Shuubiyya* was that it made an effort to falsify the historical heritage of Arabs and to discredit their place in history (al-Duri, 1981: 11). It appears that the last supposition has tried to draw attention to at least two matters: (1) the *Shuubis* were enemies not only of the Arab race but also of Islam and (2) the *Shuubiyya* was a far-reaching movement which could not be limited to the *Shuubis'* scholarly and literary activities. The second point has been confirmed by different investigators. In his doctoral thesis, entitled *Arap Edebiyatında Şu'ûbiyye*, Kılıçlı maintains that the movement had political and activist sides in addition to its intellectual aspect. To exemplify these features of the *Shuubiyya*, he referred to the Tahirid dynasty (821-73), which Tahir ibn Husayn founded in Khurasan. He referred to this dynasty as the first success of the Persian *Shuubis*. Kılıçlı also defended the opinion that the Tahirid emirate was a starting point for the separatist movements which would weaken the Arab state and accelerate its collapse (1986: 181). It can be inferred from his commentary on the *Shuubis* that they were separatists who urged the *Mawali* elements to break away from the empire. Undoubtedly, to cite more studies which agree with the argument that the *Shuubis'* purpose was to re-establish the Persian regime is possible, but in this case, the same claims and ideas would just be repeated. In general terms, the discussion in question contains these different comments, analyses and approaches.

To synthesize the opposing theses about the issue seems no less difficult than to summarize them briefly and clearly. However, it is possible to make a comparison by discovering the strengths and weaknesses of both judgments. It should be stated initially that the scanty historical data on both the *Shuubis* and the *Shuubi* bureaucrats tell modern researchers almost nothing about their ultimate target. The primary sources have generally introduced some of them as *ahl al-taswiya* and some of them as hostile to the Arab race, *zindiq*





The Role of Persian Bureaucrats in The Shuubiyya Movement: Early Abbasid Period

or dualist, but not as rebels or secessionists. Hence, on the basis of the available historical materials, to define them as armed insurgents or revolutionary groups whose goal was to destroy the Abbasid caliphate or to gain autonomy or independence would be a misinterpretation. This means that Gibb's view is to some extent affirmed through the information transmitted by the authors and historians of the period. Nevertheless Norris's objection must be taken into consideration for a realistic assessment of the controversy. Similarly, the sources do not allow experts on the subject to claim unhesitatingly or to be sure that all of *Shuubi* officers had a strong sense of belonging to the empire and just served the interests of the Abbasids when they struggled to disseminate the Persian values and traditions. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that some *Shuubis* had been perceived as opponents<sup>2</sup> by certain caliphs and were presumably murdered for this reason alone. In the light of these phenomena, a theory which advocates that the *Shuubiyya* doctrine and its representatives were legitimate in the eyes of the Abbasids can be exposed to severe criticisms. Yet, at this point, a critical question must be asked: How did the Abbasid governments overlook the presence of the (Persian) *Shuubi* officers in the administrative and bureaucratic departments? The question may bring up another: Were all Abbasid caliphs of the early times aware of the Persian officials' tendency towards the *Shuubiyya*? Obviously, trying to determine the attitude of the caliphs towards them would be beyond the scope of the current paper. Nevertheless, the supposition that the growing effect and weight of Persian *Shuubis* in the management might be a result of the changing conjunctural conditions and the caliphs' different policies towards the *Mawali* elements can be suggested here. The qualities the *Shuubi* officers had also demonstrated that they may have been employed because they were well-educated and versatile not because they were the followers of the movement. As for the second argument, its weak points have already been revealed by the strong sides of the previous one. Indeed, as far as is known, there is no a remarkable data or proof to show the *Shuubis* as political and/or activist figures. Even if it is possible to argue that they might have carried out a propaganda campaign which could menace the integrity of the Abbasid empire in order to obtain political acquisitions, it can not unmistakably be attested by the original sources. In addition, the case of the Tahirids may not be an accurate instance or adequate evidence for proving the argument. Even though Tahir ibn Husayn's sympathy for the movement and scholars and authors who wrote works to satirize the Arabs and to exalt the Persians is well known, this does not appear to mean that the dynasty was established thanks to the *Shuubiyya* ideology or the foundation of the dynasty was a victory of its proponents. Consequently, more definite indications are needed to put forward the theory that the movement had a direct impact on particular political developments.

2 Perhaps, it may be underlined here that the term is not used in the meaning of "insurgent" or "secessionist".





## Conclusion

The relative libertarian environment provided by the Abbasid regime enabled the *Mawali* to react against the discourses and actions of the chauvinist policy whom many Umayyad rulers espoused. The *Shuubiyya* idea began to germinate in the last years of the Umayyad epoch and it was transformed into an efficient way for such a reaction after several decades. Originally, the maxim of its members was “no race is superior to others”; later, “the Arabs are inferior to other races” would be the motto of another fraction of the movement. The second phrase involving an overtly racist mentality may have been one of the factors which caused the *Shuubiyya* to gain notoriety in the eyes of believers. On the other hand, the *Shuubiyya* was able to rally supporters from various elements of the *Mawali* community, although the Persians were the most active members of them. These Persian *Shuubis*, some of whom obtained high positions in the Abbasid bureaucratic organization, endeavoured vigorously to reinforce the movement’s teaching. A deep evaluation of the discussion is not required to conclude that the *Shuubiyya* could not have attained a wide popularity in the different regions of the Islamic world without their studies and works on various issues. The patrons’ contributions to the process were not less vital. They who strove to reach almost the same ideal, namely to spread the Persian culture and tradition throughout the empire, both encouraged the *Shuubis* and sponsored their scholarly and literary activities. With such patronage and financial backing, this group, whose members were the elite and influential figures of the ruling and military class, helped to motivate scientific and cultural advances. The campaign which was carried out by the collaboration of the *Shuubis* and their patrons must have also been one of the main pillars of the Abbasid Renaissance.

The question of the *Shuubis*’ purpose has preoccupied many historians for more than a century and different theories have been argued to find its answer. A claim which asserts that the *Shuubiyya* was against the caliphate, inasmuch as its adherents struggled to transfer the administrative institutions or governmental bureaus of the old Persians to the empire, can be refuted easily. To disprove such a claim, it would be enough to remind the reader about the historical fact that some Muslim Arab caliphs had adapted so many practices of the ancient empires such as Sasanid and Byzantine to their own rule before the *Shuubiyya* movement emerged. Due to the lack of sufficient sources and/or evidences, it also seems difficult to prove or reject fully the idea that the *Shuubis* dedicated themselves entirely to serving the empire. As a matter of fact, there are some hints, signs and cases to suspect the accuracy of this theory. In brief, the current knowledge has compelled researchers to accept that the *Shuubiyya* was a literary-scholarly movement whose moderate representatives advocated the equality of all races while its extremist supporters made propaganda for the superiority of the Ajam and tried to revive the Persians’ manners and customs at the expense of the Arabs’ traditions. However, the validity of this conviction can undoubtedly be challenged by any new historical record, written document or clear proof which may be found in the future.





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