

Arabia before Islam

In writing the history of Islam, it is customary to begin with a survey of the political, economic, social and religious conditions of Arabia on the eve of the Proclamation by Muhammad (may God bless him and his Ahlul-Bait) of his mission as Messenger of God.

It is the second convention of the historians (the first being to give a geographical description of the region). I shall also abide by this convention, and will review briefly, the general conditions in Arabia in the late sixth and early seventh century A.D.

Political Conditions in Arabia

The most remarkable feature of the political life of Arabia before Islam was the total absence of political organization in any form. With the exception of Yemen in the south-west, no part of the Arabian peninsula had any government at any time, and the Arabs never acknowledged any authority other than the authority of the chiefs of their tribes. The authority of the tribal chiefs, however, rested, in most cases, on their character and personality, and was moral rather than political.

The modern student of history finds it incredible that the Arabs lived, generation after generation, century after century, without a government of any kind. Since there was no government, there was no law and no order.

The only law of the land was lawlessness. In the event a crime was committed, the injured party took law in its own hands, and tried to administer "justice" to the offender. This system led very frequently to acts of horrendous cruelty.

If the Arab ever exercised any modicum of restraint, it was not because of any susceptibility he had to questions of right or wrong but because of the fear of provoking reprisals and vendetta. Vendetta consumed whole generations of Arabs.

Since there were no such things as police, courts or judges, the only protection a man could find from his enemies, was in his own tribe. The tribe had an obligation to protect its members even if they had committed crimes. Tribalism or '*asabiyya* (the clan spirit) took precedence over ethics. A tribe that failed to protect its members from their enemies, exposed itself to ridicule, obloquy and contempt. Ethics, of course, did not enter the picture anywhere.

Since Arabia did not have a government, and since the Arabs were anarchists by instinct, they were locked up in ceaseless warfare. War was a permanent institution of the Arabian society. The desert could support only a limited number of people, and the state of inter-tribal war maintained a rigid control over the growth of population. But the Arabs themselves did not see war in this light.

To them, war was a pastime or rather a dangerous sport, or a species of tribal drama, waged by professionals, according to old and gallant codes, while the "audience" cheered. Eternal peace held no appeal for them, and war provided an escape from drudgery and from the monotony of life in the desert.

They, therefore, courted the excitement of the clash of arms. War gave them an opportunity to display their skills at archery, fencing and horsemanship, and also, in war, they could distinguish themselves by their heroism and at the same time win glory and honor for their

tribes. In many cases, the Arabs fought for the sake of fighting, whether or not there was a cause belli.

G. E. Grunebaum

“In the century before the rise of Islam the tribes dissipated all their energies in tribal guerrilla fighting, all against all.” (*Classical Islam – A History 600-1258 – 1970*)

The nomadic tribes ranged over the peninsula and plundered the caravans and the small settlements. Many caravans and villages bought immunity from these raids by paying a fixed amount of money to the nomadic freebooters.

It is important to grasp the fact that on the eve of the birth of Islam there was no government at any level in Arabia, and this fact may even have affected the rise of Islam itself. The total absence of government, even in its most rudimentary form, was a phenomenon so extraordinary that it has been noted and commented upon by many orientalist, among them:

D. S. Margoliouth

“Arabia would have remained pagan had there been a man in Mecca who could strike a blow; who would act. But many as were Mohammed's ill-wishers, there was not one of them who had this sort of courage; and (as has been seen) there was no magistracy by which he could be tried.” (*Mohammed and the Rise of Islam, 1931*)

Maxime Rodinson

“Manslaughter carried severe penalties according to the unwritten law of the desert. In practice the free Arabs were bound by no written code of law, and no state existed to enforce its statutes with the backing of a police force. The only protection for a man's life was the certainty established by custom, that it would be dearly bought. Blood for blood and a life for a life. The vendetta, *tha'r* in Arabic, is one of the pillars of Bedouin society.” (*Mohammed, 1971*)

Herbert J. Muller

“In Mohammed's Arabia there was no state – there were only scattered independent tribes and towns. The Prophet formed his own state, and he gave it a sacred law prescribed by Allah.” (*The Loom of History, 1958*)

The population of Arabia consisted of two main divisions, sedentary and nomadic. Hijaz and South Arabia were dotted with many small and a few large towns. The rest of the country had a floating population composed of Bedouins.

They were backward in the civil and political sense but they were also a source of anxiety and fear for the sedentary population. They lived as pirates of the desert, and they were notorious for their unrestrained individualism and anarchic tribal particularism.

The more important tribes exercised a certain amount of authority in their respective areas. In Makkah the dominant tribe was the Quraysh; in Yathrib, the dominant tribes were the Arab tribes of Aus and Khazraj, and the Jewish tribes of Nadheer, Qaynuqaa and Qurayza. The Quraysh of Makkah considered themselves superior to the Bedouins but the latter had only contempt for the town-dwellers who for them were only a “nation of shopkeepers.”

All Arabs were notorious for certain characteristics such as arrogance, conceit, boastfulness, vindictiveness and excessive love of plunder. Their arrogance was partly responsible for their

failure to establish a state of their own. They lacked political discipline, and until the rise of Islam, never acknowledged any authority as paramount in Arabia.

They acknowledged the authority of a man who led them into a foray but he could command their obedience only if they had an assurance of receiving a fair share of the booty, and his authority lapsed as soon as the expedition was over.

Economic Conditions

Economically, the Jews were the leaders of Arabia. They were the owners of the best arable lands in Hijaz, and they were the best farmers in the country. They were also the entrepreneurs of such industries as existed in Arabia in those days, and they enjoyed a monopoly of the armaments industry.

Slavery was an economic institution of the Arabs. Male and female slaves were sold and bought like animals, and they formed the most depressed class of the Arabian society.

The most powerful class of the Arabs was made up by the capitalists and money-lenders. The rates of interest which they charged on loans were exorbitant, and were especially designed to make them richer and richer, and the borrowers poorer and poorer.

The most important urban centers of Arabia were Makkah and Yathrib, both in Hijaz. The citizens of Makkah were mostly merchants, traders and money-lenders. Their caravans traveled in summer to Syria and in winter to Yemen.

They also traveled to Bahrain in the east and to Iraq in the northeast. The caravan trade was basic to the economy of Makkah, and its organization called for considerable skill, experience and ability.

R. V. C. Bodley

The arrivals and departures of caravans were important events in the lives of the Meccans. Almost everyone in Mecca had some kind of investment in the fortunes of the thousands of camels, the hundreds of men, horses, and donkeys which went out with hides, raisins, and silver bars, and came back with oils, perfumes and manufactured goods from Syria, Egypt and Persia, and with spices and gold from the south. (*The Messenger, 1946, p. 31*)

In Yathrib, the Arabs made their living by farming, and the Jews made theirs as businessmen and industrialists. But the Jews were not exclusively businessmen and industrialists; among them also there were many farmers, and they had brought much waste land under cultivation.

Economically, socially and politically, Hijaz was the most important province in Arabia in the early seventh century.

Francesco Gabrieli

On the eve of Islam the most complex and advanced human aggregate of the Arabian peninsula lived in the city of the Quraysh. The hour of the south Arab kingdoms, of Petra and Palmyra, had passed for some time in the history of Arabia. Now the future was being prepared there, in Hijaz (*The Arabs – A Compact History, 1963*)

The Arabs and the Jews both practiced usury. Many among them were professional usurers; they lived on the interest they charged on their loans.

E. A. Belyaev

“Usury (riba) was widely practiced in Mecca, for in order to participate in the profitable caravan trade many a Meccan who had only a modest income had to resort to usurers; despite the high interest, he could hope to benefit after the safe return of the caravan. The richer merchants were both traders and usurers.

Money-lenders usually took a dinar for a dinar, a dirhem for a dirhem, in other words, 100 per cent interest. In the Koran 3:130, Allah addressing the faithful, prescribes:

'Do not practice usury doubled twofold.'

This could mean that interests of 200 or even 400 per cent were demanded. The nets of Meccan usury caught not only fellow-citizens and tribesmen but also members of the Hijazi

Bedouin tribes active in the Meccan trade. As in ancient Athens, ‘the principal means of oppressing the people's freedom were money and usury.’ (*Arabs, Islam and the Arab Caliphate in the Early Middle Ages, 1969*)

Social Conditions

Arabia was a male-dominated society. Women had no status of any kind other than as sex objects. The number of women a man could marry was not fixed. When a man died, his son “inherited” all his wives except his own mother.

A savage custom of the Arabs was to bury their female infants alive. Even if an Arab did not wish to bury his daughter alive, he still had to uphold this “honorable” tradition, being unable to resist social pressures.

Drunkenness was a common vice of the Arabs. With drunkenness went their gambling. They were compulsive drinkers and compulsive gamblers. The relations of the sexes were extremely loose. Many women sold sex to make their living since there was little else they could do. These women flew flags on their houses, and were called “ladies of the flags” (dhat-er-rayyat).

The State of Religion in Pre-Islamic Arabia

The period in the Arabian history which preceded the birth of Islam is known as the *Times of Ignorance*. Judging by the beliefs and the practices of the pagan Arabs, it appears that it was a most appropriate name. The Arabs were the devotees of a variety of “religions” which can be classified into the following categories.

1. Idol-worshippers or polytheists. Most of the Arabs were idolaters. They worshipped numerous idols and each tribe had its own idol or idols and fetishes. They had turned the Kaaba in Makkah, which according to tradition, had been built by the Prophet Abraham and his son, Ismael, and was dedicated by them to the service of One God, into a heathen pantheon housing 360 idols of stone and wood.

2. Atheists This group was composed of the materialists and believed that the world was eternal.

3. Zindiqs They were influenced by the Persian doctrine of dualism in nature. They believed that there were two gods representing the twin forces of good and evil or light and darkness, and both were locked up in an unending struggle for supremacy.

4. Sabines. They worshipped the stars.

5. Jews When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and drove the Jews out of Palestine and Syria, many of them found new homes in Hijaz in Arabia. Under their influence, many Arabs also became converts to Judaism. Their strong centers were the towns of Yathrib, Khayber, Fadak and Umm-ul-Qura.

6. Christians. The Romans had converted the north Arabian tribe of Ghassan to Christianity. Some clans of Ghassan had migrated to and had settled in Hijaz. In the south, there were many Christians in Yemen where the creed was originally brought by the Ethiopian invaders. Their strong center was the town of Najran.

7. Monotheists There was a small group of monotheists present in Arabia on the eve of the rise of Islam. Its members did not worship idols, and they were the followers of the Prophet Abraham. The members of the families of Muhammad, the future prophet, and Ali ibn Abi Talib, the future caliph, and most members of their clan – the Banu Hashim – belonged to this group.

Education among the Arabs Before Islam

Among the Arabs there were extremely few individuals who could read and write. Most of them were not very eager to learn these arts. Some historians are of the opinion that the culture of the period was almost entirely oral. The Jews and the Christians were the custodians of such knowledge as Arabia had.

The greatest intellectual accomplishment of the pagan Arabs was their poetry. They claimed that God had bestowed the most remarkable qualities of the head upon the Greeks (its proof is their science and philosophy); of hand upon the Chinese (its proof is their craftsmanship); and of the tongue upon the Arabs (its proof is their eloquence). Their greatest pride, both before and after Islam, was their eloquence and poetry. The importance of poetry to them can be gauged by the following testimony:

D. S. Margoliouth

In nomad Arabia, the poets were part of the war equipment of the tribe; they defended their own, and damaged hostile tribes by the employment of a force which was supposed indeed to work mysteriously, but which in fact consisted in composing dexterous phrases of a sort that would attract notice, and would consequently be diffused and remembered widely. (*Mohammed and the Rise of Islam, 1931*)

E. A. Belyaev

Most of the information on the economic conditions, social regime and mores of the Arabs in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., comes from ancient Arabic or pre-Islamic poetry, known for its 'photographic faithfulness' to all phases of Arabian tribal life and its environment. Specialists, therefore, accept this poetry as the 'most important and authoritative source for describing the Arab people and their customs' in this period (*Arabs, Islam and the Arab Caliphate in the Early Middle Ages, 1969*)

Arabic poetry was rich in eloquence and imagery but it was limited in range, and was lacking in profundity. Its content might be interesting but it was stereotyped. The masterpieces of their poetry follow almost exactly the same sequence of ideas and images. It was, nevertheless, a faithful mirror of life in ancient Arabia. Also, in cultivating the art of poetry,

the Arab poets were, unconsciously, developing one of the greatest artifacts of mankind, the Arabic language.

The greatest compositions of the pagan Arabs were the so-called “Golden Odes,” a collection of seven poems, supposedly of unsurpassed excellence in spontaneity, power and eloquence. They were suspended in Kaaba as a challenge to any aspiring genius to excel or to match them. Sir William Muir writes about these poems as follows:

The Seven Suspended Poems still survive from a period anterior even to Mohammed, a wondrous specimen of artless eloquence. The beauty of the language and wild richness of the imagery are acknowledged by the European reader; but the subject of the poet was limited, and the beaten track seldom deviated from.

The charm of his mistress, the envied spot marked by the still fresh traces of her encampment, the solitude of her deserted haunts, his generosity and prowess, the unrivaled glory of his tribe, the noble qualities of his camel - these were the themes which, with little variation of treatment, and with no contrivance whatever of plot or story, occupied the Arab muse – and some of them only added fuel to the besetting vices of the people, vainglory, envy, vindictiveness and pride (*The Life of Mohammed, 1877*)

With the rise of Islam the emphasis shifted, temporarily, from poetry to prose, and poetry lost its prestigious position as the “queen” of the arts of Arabia.

The greatest “composition” of Islam was Al-Qur’an al-Majid, the Scripture of Islam, and it was in prose. Muslims believe that Qur’an was “composed” in Heaven before it was revealed to Muhammad, the Messenger of God. They believe that human genius can never produce anything that can match its style or contents. For the last fifty generations, it has been, for them, a model of literary, philosophical, theological, legal, metaphysical and mystical thought.

An attempt has been made in the foregoing pages to portray the general state of Arabia and the lifestyle of the Arabs before Islam. This “portrait” is authentic as it has been drawn from the “archives” of the pre-Islamic Arabs themselves.

Judging by this portrait, it appears that Arabia before Islam was without social amenity or historical depth, and the Arabs lived in moral bankruptcy and spiritual servitude. Life for them was devoid of meaning, purpose and direction. The human spirit was in chains, and was awaiting, as it were, a signal, to make a titanic struggle, to break loose and to become free.

The signal was given in A.D. 610 by Muhammad, the son of Abdullah, in the city of Makkah, when he proclaimed his mission of prophethood, and launched the movement called Islam on its world-girdling career.

Islam was the greatest blessing for mankind ever. It set men and women free, through obedience to their Creator, from slavery in all its manifestations. Muhammad, the Messenger of God, was the supreme emancipator of mankind. He extricated man from the “pits of life.”

The Arabian peninsula was geographically peripheral and politically *terra incognita* until the early seventh century A.D. It was then that Muhammad put it on the political map of the world by making it the theater of momentous events of history.

Before Islam, the Arabs had played only a marginal role in the history of the Middle East, and they would have remained forever a nation of animists and shepherds if Muhammad (may God bless him and his Ahlul-Bait) had not provided them the focus and the stimulus that welded their scattered nomadic tribes into a purposeful driving force.

He molded a “nation” out of a rough mass without basic structure. He invested the Arabs with a new dynamism, idealism and explosive creativity, and they changed the course of history. He created an entirely new mental and psychological ecology, and his work placed an emphatic period in world history; it was the end of one era and the beginning of another.

Writing about this watershed in history, Francesco Gabrieli says in his book, *The Arabs – A Compact History*, (1963):

Thus terminated the pagan prelude in the history of the Arabian people. Whoever compares it with what followed, which gave the Arabs a primary role on the stage of world, and inspired high thoughts and high works, not only to an exceptional man emerged from their bosom, but to an entire elite which for several generations gathered and promoted his word, cannot but notice the leap that the destinies of this people assume here.

The rhythm of its life, until then, weak and dispersed, was to find a unity, a propulsive center, a goal; and all this under the sign of religious faith. No romantic love for the primitive can make us fail to recognize that without Mohammed and Islam they would have probably remained vegetating for centuries in the desert, destroying themselves in the bloodletting of their internecine wars, looking at Byzantium, at Ctesiphon and even at Axum as distant beacons of civilization completely out of their reach.