

**Political Engineering and the Origins of Culture:
The Institutional Foundations of the Rise of Islam**

David Siddhartha Patel
Department of Political Science
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305-2044

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The spread of Islam and rise of the Muslim empire in the 7th century was one of the swiftest and most dramatic cultural changes in human history. This essay will explore how a fragmented nomadic tribal society from the deserts of Arabia remained Islamic after creating an empire in only a dozen years. A thorough explanation for the success of the Arab conquests is beyond the scope of this paper.¹ Instead, the central question examined here is why allegiance to Islam became a cultural focal point for Arab tribesmen so quickly. What explains the rapid creation of an Islamic supra-identity and why did people condition their behavior on it?² Why didn't tribesmen defect from the Islamic system in the second half of the 7th century like they did in the first half? The central argument of this essay is that political engineering is responsible for the creation of this new cultural equilibrium. This is explored through an examination of two institutions propagated during the reign of the second *rashid*, 'Rightly-Guided' Caliph or 'successor'³, 'Umar bin Al-Khattab. I argue institutions purposefully created by 'Umar to distribute the booty of the Islamic conquests and the manner in which new Islamic cities were organized (1) created incentives for tribesmen to convert to Islam and remain loyal, and (2) created mechanisms of common knowledge dissemination that made it easy to see how many other tribesmen had converted to Islam but difficult to identify how many might be interested in exiting the Islamic system (i.e. – apostasy). The spatial segregation of tribes in cities was consequential for collective mobilization. These institutions

¹ For discussions of the conquests and a sampling of different explanations, see Donner 1981, Glubb 1967, Gabrieli 1968, and Crone 1987.

² This is not to say that tribal identities no longer mattered. In fact, as will be seen, the continued salience of tribal ties in cities helped preserve the fledgling Islamic super-identity.

³ The full title was *khalifat rasul Allah*, or Successor/Viceregent of the Messenger of God. See Crone and Hinds 1986 for a discussion of the title of *khalifat*.

reflected pre-Islamic institutional elements and are critical for understanding why an Islamic identity became an equilibrium and survived.

This essay is organized as follows. Section I elaborates on the central question and lays out the historical comparison this paper seeks to explain. Sections IIA and IIB examine the two key institutions I argue explain the historical change identified in section I: the *diwan* stipend system and the spatial organization of Islamic cities. Section III concludes by comparing my argument with the existing literature and suggesting avenues for further inquiry.

I. Islam as a cultural equilibrium

This section discusses how revolt by Arab tribesmen changed from the first half of the 7th century to the second half. In the first half, tribesmen were willing and attempted to apostatize and exit the Islamic system, both during the Prophet's lifetime and immediately after his death. In the second half of the century, however, Arab tribesmen did not exit the Islamic system and instead fought numerous internal wars over the leadership of the Muslim community. The later revolts took place within an Islamic context. The first half of this section examines the wars of *ridda* in order to explain what 'exiting the Islamic system' or apostasy entailed. The second half of this section examines how revolts differed in the later decades of Islam's first century. This historical comparison demonstrates that the nature of revolt did indeed change.

When the Prophet Muhammad died in June 632, the fledgling Islamic state, covering most of the Arabian Peninsula, fell apart in revolt. The tribes of the Najd, Northeastern Arabia, and southern Arabia either renounced Islam altogether and began to

follow rival ‘prophets’⁴ or at least rejected the authority of the Muslim state centered at Mecca. Only the Hijaz (including the cities of Mecca, Medina, and Ta’if) remained loyal to Abu Bakr, the first Caliph, in what became known as the Wars of *rida* (Apostasy).

Less than two dozen years later, however, a civil war for the leadership of the Muslim empire erupted and lasted five years, from 656-661 (the First *fitnah*, literally ‘temptation’ or ‘trials’). A second devastating civil war lasting 12 years (the Second *fitnah*) was fought over the same issue before the end of the 7th century (680-692).⁵

During these two civil wars, however, tribes did **not** revolt against Islam and leave the Muslim community; they only fought over the leadership of it. One author states,

*“the striking thing about the First and Second Civil Wars is the degree to which the tribesmen remained bound to the state throughout them, even though the leadership of the state was divided against itself...it never seems to have occurred to most of them that they should or could raise the standard of revolt in their own name.”*⁶

The central puzzle of this essay, therefore, is what happened during those two decades (632-656) between the death of Muhammad and the First *fitnah* that made Islamic allegiance a cultural equilibrium from which tribesmen did not have an incentive to defect in the second half of the 7th century? Why were tribesmen willing to abandon Islam and effectively secede from the Muslim empire in 632 but did not do so during the later civil wars?

The Wars of *Ridda* (Apostasy) – attempts to exit the Islamic system

During his lifetime, the Prophet Muhammad made no provisions for succession after his death. After his death in 632, a number of tribes throughout Arabia decided to

⁴ The most notorious of these rival prophets were Maslama (remembered by the Arabic diminutive Musailima) who led parts of the Bani Hanifa (Bakr tribe) in central Arabia and Talhah (diminutive – Tulaiha) who led parts of the tribe of Asad in the mountainous northeast. The (Christian?) prophetess Sajah is also notable. She briefly allied with Maslama before fleeing back to Mesopotamia.

⁵ This Second *fitnah* led to the permanent division between Sunni and Shi’i.

either renounce Islam or, although willing to recognize Abu Bakr as his successor, refused to pay the alms-tax demanded of all Muslims.⁷ Abu Bakr made the payment of this tax a key measure of loyalty to Islam.⁸ Peaceful tribes claiming to be Muslim but refusing to pay the alms-tax, true renegades reverting to old religions or paying loyalty to rival prophets, and Arabs who had never converted to Islam were all considered apostates.⁹ Even the residents of Medina and Mecca initially appeared almost ready to apostatize from Islam.¹⁰ ‘Umar, who later succeeded Abu Bakr as Caliph, took charge of securing the pledge of allegiance of all residents of Medina and some scholars suggest force was used to elicit allegiance to Islam and Abu Bakr.¹¹ Many tribes considered their allegiance to Islam as a political contract with Muhammad, a contract that ended with his death. If Abu Bakr and the Islamic state wanted their continued loyalty, they argued, a new contract would need to be negotiated. This problem of apostasy or ‘wavering’ also plagued the Muslim community during Muhammad’s lifetime; a fact noted often in the Qur’an.¹² Scholars in much of the Arab world typically argue that belief in Islam had not

⁶ Donner 1981, p. 275. Donner makes this statement in the conclusion of a detailed study of the military nature of the early conquests. He does not delve into this key question.

⁷ It had been an obligation of all Muslims to pay an annual tax (instead of voluntary alms) since at least 630, Madelung 1997, p. 46.

⁸ This was not just an issue of taxes for the Muslims. Paying *zakat* is an Islamic obligation and by arguing their compact was with Muhammad, self-styled Muslims who refused to pay the alms-tax were seen as renegeing on their compact with and obligations to the larger Muslim community. Muslims emphasize that their religion is not just about an individual’s compact with God, but is also about an individual’s responsibility to all other Muslims. Separating from the core Muslim community at Medina was seen as ‘backing out of Islam itself.’ Hodgson 1974, p. 197.

⁹ See Madelung 1997, p. 48-9 for a discussion of the Qur’anic justification of this action. For a discussion of individual tribes’ type of defection (renounce Islam, refusal to pay tax, etc.), see al-Tabari 1985 Vol X. Shoufani 1973 controversially suggests the term *riddah* originally applied to certain tribal groups in the Najd and Eastern Arabia who withheld taxes (such as Ghatafan, Tayy, and Tamim) and was only applied by later historians to the other Arabian tribes fought during this period.

¹⁰ Madelung 1997, p. 44, fn. 44. Also see Hodgson 1974, p. 197.

¹¹ Madelung 1997, p. 43, especially regarding the Banu Hashim and parts of the Meccan Quraysh.

¹² For example, Sura 49, 15 reads, “*The Bedouins say, ‘We believe.’ Say: ‘You do not believe’; rather say, ‘We surrender’; for belief has not yet entered your hearts... The believers are those who believe in God and His Messenger, then have not doubted, and have struggled with their possessions and their selves in*

yet taken root in the apostates. They would likely fail to identify the variance in the nature of revolt explored in this paper or explain it as a function of religious devotion, not of individual incentives manipulated by economic and political institutions.

The Meccan tribe of Quraysh remained loyal because they saw Islam as an opportunity to rule other Arabs. In the following wars, Abu Bakr relied heavily on the old Meccan aristocracy to put down the *ridda*, including groups who had earlier led the opposition to Muhammad and converted to Islam only in the last few years of the Prophet's lifetime.¹³ The Muslim armies marched out against the tribes in apostasy. The rival prophet Maslama was defeated and most of his supporters were massacred in the infamous 'Garden of Death' in Yemana. Other rival prophets such as Talhah and Sajah were either defeated or driven out of Arabia. Islamic armies moved against 'rebellious' tribes in Bahrain, Oman, and Yemen and converted all of Arabia.¹⁴

The Islamic community was willing to suffer tremendous costs to punish the apostates. The battle against the Bani Hanifa led by Maslama, for example, resulted in 1,200 deaths and 2,400 wounded out of a force of 5,000 Muslims.¹⁵ This was, by far, the most costly battle ever fought by the Muslim community (the battle of Badr, in comparison, resulted in 49 Quraishi dead out of about 1,000 and only 74 of the 700 Muslims at the battle of Uhud died). The loss of so many Muslims in this battle who had listened to Muhammad and memorized the Prophet's message, in fact, stimulated the

the way of God; those – they are the truthful ones." Arberry 1955 Vol. 2, p. 232. Similarly, there are numerous denunciations of hypocrites (*munaḥiqun*) throughout the Qur'an; Madelung 1997, p. 48.

¹³ The Qurashi clans of Makhzum and 'Abd Shams, for example.

¹⁴ For descriptions of the campaigns of the *ridda*, see Glubb 1963, p. 105-119, Hodgson 1974, p. 197-99, Mohy-ud-din 1968, Shoufani 1973, and al-Tabari 1985, Vol. X.

¹⁵ Glubb 1963, p. 113.

Muslim community to collect the Prophet's revelations in a single volume that became the Qur'an.

The decision by Abu Bakr to condemn the tribes revolting against the Islamic system and mobilize the Islamic armies can be interpreted as the creation of a (cultural) trigger strategy and a reputation for punishing apostasy. The Muslim authorities demonstrated their willingness to suffer significant costs to punish defection from the Islamic system and imposed immense punishment on defectors (for some apostate tribes, the men were massacred and the women and children were sold into slavery). Abu Bakr sent a letter to the apostate tribes stating that a general was being sent to bring them back into the Islamic system. Abu Bakr continues,

“but I have ordered him to fight those who deny [him] for that reason. So he will not spare any one of them he can gain mastery over, [but may] burn them with fire, slaughter them by any means, and take women and children captive; nor shall he accept from anyone anything except Islam.”¹⁶

The repercussions of this strategy are often overlooked. It created shared expectations on the part of Arab tribesmen regarding the likely reaction of the Islamic authorities in the event of defection. Apostasy was considered one of the gravest possible sins a Muslim could commit. Everyone after this point knew that defection from the Islamic system would not be tolerated and knew the central Islamic authorities would react. This trigger strategy, however, is not sufficient to explain non-revolt later since the relative power of the central Muslim authority declined markedly compared to the peripheral garrison towns in the following decades, best evidenced by the ability of disgruntled Muslims to march to Mecca and murder the third Caliph, Uthman.

¹⁶ Al-Tabari 1985, Vol. 10, p. 57.

The civil wars of the late 7th century – revolt within the Islamic system

Revolts and civil wars were very common throughout the Muslim empire in the second half of the 7th century but all of these were internal conflicts, fought in an Islamic context. Factions fought over the leadership of the Islamic community and did not seek to ‘exit’ the Islamic system in the same way the *ridda* tribes had done only a few decades earlier.

Dissatisfaction with the existing Islamic leadership reached a climax during the reign of Uthman, the third Caliph and ‘Umar’s successor, when tribesmen from the outlying provinces coordinated their protests on Medina.¹⁷ Corruption and nepotism marked Uthman’s administration. Members of Uthman’s kin-group, Umayyad, acquired and hoarded tremendous personal wealth. His relatives were appointed to leadership positions throughout the Muslim empire and one governor received a salary of a million dirhams a year.¹⁸ Sedition in Iraq, Egypt, and Syria against corruption and flagrant disregard of Islamic precepts by Uthman’s Umayyad governors came to a head in 656 when insurgents from all three regions marched to Medina. The insurgents isolated the Caliph in his house for forty days before killing him and raising Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad, as the new Caliph of the Islamic community.

The next six years, 656-661, saw the Muslim world descend into the First *fitnah*. This differed from the earlier *ridda* wars in the sense that it was a true civil war with,

¹⁷ Most historians tend to explain this coordination in deterministic terms or as a coincidence. Significant work remains to be done in order to explain how protestors in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt were able to coordinate their protests and all march individually to Mecca at almost precisely the same time. Periods of widespread protest in the early Islamic world seem to be triggered by key events. Additional work along these lines may help us understand which events were likely to be focal points for coordinated revolt.

¹⁸ Moosa 1965, p. 72. Compare this figure with the size of the pensions distributed through the *diwan*, discussed in the next section.

basically, three groups fighting over the right to lead the Muslim community.¹⁹ These battles were clearly fought within an Islamic context and the major line of disagreement was over whether to punish Uthman's murderers. Indicative of the 'Islamic' nature of this civil war is its key turning point – the arbitration at Siffin. The supporters of Ali fought the supporters of Muawiya, the Umayyad governor of Syria, at Siffin from May to June 657. The fighting stopped when pages from the Qur'an were hoisted on the end of lances and arbitration was called for according to God's will.²⁰

Similarly, the Second *fitnah*, from 680-692, was fought largely between the Syrian based Umayyads, the supporters of the family of Ali (Shi'i), and groups from the hijaz (united behind the prominent Muslim Abdallah Ibn-al-Zubayr) over which candidate for the caliphate should succeed Muawiya.²¹ This was, again, a conflict fought in the context of Islam and groups did not renounce Islam or exit the system.

During these later civil wars, a number of schisms emerged within Islam but no one exited the nascent Islamic system. A group of Muslims, known as the Khawarij, broke off from Ali's camp following the above mentioned arbitration at Siffin. The Khawarij Muslims, marked by an extreme piety that bordered on fanaticism, were clearly not apostates from Islam.²² Their descendants settled in the Southeast tip of the Arabian Peninsula and their descendants, the Ibadhis, form the modern state of Oman.²³ Similarly, many Shi'i Muslims settled in the Yemen. The origins of the modern Middle East state

¹⁹ I consider the three groups to be Ali versus, first, Zubair and Talha, and later against Muawiya.

²⁰ Hodgson 1974, p. 214, but this event is reported in virtually every history of the period.

²¹ Hodgson 1974, p. 219-223.

²² The split was a result of their disapproval of Ali's willingness to arbitrate with Muawiya. They claimed Ali did not have the right to negotiate over the divine-sanctioned Caliphate, a jurisdiction reserved for Allah. The Kharijites, in a number of ways, resemble early European Protestant movements.

²³ Legend states that only nine Khawarij Muslims out of an army of 12,000 survived the decisive battle against Ali's forces at Nahrawan in 658 and two of them settled in Oman. For a history of Oman, including these events see Phillips 1967.

system partly rests in these early years of Islam.²⁴ The Second *fitnah* resulted in the permanent schism between Sunni and Shi'i, the two major Islamic groups found in the world today, and the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty. Although these groups differed (and continue to, on some points) over legitimate leadership and the nature of authority in the Islamic world, their adherents are clearly Muslims and follow the same cultural tenets and modes of behavior as one another. Groups did not defect from Islam during or after the First *fitnah* as they did during the wars of *ridda*. Something had changed to make Islamic adherence a cultural equilibrium from which groups did not have an incentive to defect, even when presented with what seems in retrospect as the ideal opportunities to do so.

II. Institutions and the political engineering of culture

Early Islamic leaders designed economic, social, and political institutions that reflected institutional elements from pre-Islamic Arabia. The rise of Islam was, in many ways, a moment of cultural crisis. I argue political entrepreneurs, such as 'Umar, were able to select which institutional elements from the Arab's cultural heritage would be invoked and preserved in the emerging Islamic culture.²⁵ Most scholars of Islamic history recognize that the rise of Islam did not signal a complete abandonment of all pre-Islamic culture. Tribal factionalism and the nature of clientelistic relations, for example, continued long into the Islamic era. No compelling explanation, however, has been offered to explain why certain pre-Islamic institutional elements were preserved under Islam while others were not. Why were some institutions stable/durable in such a

²⁴ Harik 1990.

²⁵ This line of argument is stimulated by Greif's cultural theory of institutional selection. See Greif 2001. The next logical step would be to examine how the institutions preserved from pre-Islamic society affected their environment and how this contributed to their durability.

changing environment and how did they, in turn, contribute to the stability of Islam? The argument suggested in the following analysis is that pre-existing clientelistic networks and tribal affiliations were self-reinforcing in a large set of environments.

This section is divided into two parts. The first, IIA, examines the creation of ‘Umar’s *diwan* system based on Arab meritocracy, which reflected clientelistic networks carried over from pre-Islamic Arabian society. Section IIB discusses the creation of new ‘Islamic’ cities in the conquered provinces. The spatial layout of these cities reflected tribal affiliations. I argue these two institutions created incentives for Arab tribesmen to convert to Islam, raised the expected costs of defection, made it easy to see how many others had converted, but made it difficult to identify other groups interested in revolting against the Islamic system.

IIA. The *diwan* system and Arab meritocracy

The *diwan* system of stipends was first instituted by ‘Umar in 636 (15AH)²⁶ to organize the pay of the Arab armies, establish a register of the fighting forces, and set the treasury in order.²⁷ The typical explanation emphasizes ‘Umar’s intention to ‘stimulate the soldier’s zeal to continue the conquest.’²⁸ My argument suggests the *diwan* was perhaps most useful as a tool for Islamic elites to manipulate the incentives of Arab tribesmen to remain loyal to Islam and punish possible defectors.

²⁶ Al-Tabari 1985, Vol. XII, p. 199-207. Some scholars place the founding closer to 640 (20AH).

²⁷ The literature dealing with the early Islamic *diwan* is rather inconsistent and confusing. Most historians treat the civilian *diwan* (‘Umar’s institution that paid stipends according to precedence in Islam) and the military *diwan* (*diwan al-jayesh* or *diwan al-djung*) as the same thing, viewing pensions, salaries, and grants similarly. (Moosa 1965, p. 70, 75) The analysis presented here is primarily concerned with the former. The most widely cited source on the early *diwan* is a German dissertation (Puin 1970) and is not available in English. Other sources of note include Moosa 1965 and the *diwan* entry in *The Encyclopedia of Islam, Vol. II* 1965, p. 323-337. For a brief discussion of sources on the *diwan*, see Morony 1984, p. 581.

²⁸ Moosa 1965, p. 69-70.

The *diwan* in these early years was essentially a system by which stipends or pensions were paid to Muslim Arabs who participated in the conquests and, in particular, emigrated to join the garrison towns in the new provinces.²⁹ This was done instead of distributing land among the conquerors. Conquered people kept their land and the Arab conquerors settled in new towns (see discussion of garrison towns below) and lived off the money granted to them by the Islamic state. A *diwan* was established in each of the garrison towns, including Basra, Kufa, and Fustat. Before ‘Umar instituted the formal *diwan* based on Islamic seniority, Abu Bakr had simply given all Muslims an equal share of any revenue delivered to Medina (which was relatively small during his reign).³⁰ Massive amounts of booty were flowing to Medina from ‘Umar’s conquests³¹ and the *diwan* distributed the wealth and rewarded those tribesmen most loyal to Islam.

The system for the distribution of stipends was based on the date of an individual’s first participation in the Islamic expansion, or *sabika* (‘precedence in Islam’). Pay, therefore, depended on past service to Islam and relationship to the Prophet, not tribe or clan (although registry in the *diwan* was by tribe). The highest stipends went to those Muslims who had fought at the battle of Badr and progressively smaller amounts were given to those who converted and fought for Islam later.³² These were not just ex-

²⁹ Over time (beyond the 7th century) the *diwan* expanded to become the bureaucratic nerve-center of the Islamic empire(s), covering a comprehensive census, land taxes, expenditures, official registry of documents, etc. It eventually came to refer to almost any central government office.

³⁰ Madelung 1997, p. 58. Muhammad, during his lifetime, had simply divided booty 1/5 for himself and the Muslim townfolk and 4/5 for the soldiers who captured it. Moosa 1965, p. 67.

³¹ Abu Huraira, for example, brought 500,000 dirhams back from an expedition to Bahrain. Moosa 1965, p. 67. Even larger amounts of booty were captured as the Muslim armies advanced into the holdings of the Byzantine and Sassanid empires.

³² In general, there were 3 levels. The first was for those who had participated in the earliest battles of expansion (*ahl al-Ayyam*) and paid between 3000-5000 dirhams (5000 for those who fought at Badr – the first victorious battle of Muhammad against the Meccans in 624; 4000 for converts after the battle of Badr and before al-Hudaybiyyah – the treaty between the Prophet and Meccans in 628). These were effectively the ‘people of Medina,’ the first Islamic converts. The second was for those who converted prior to and participated in the decisive Battle of Qadissiyya and paid 2000-3000 dirhams (3000 for conversion after al-

post rewards. Current Muslims and converts could expect their stipends to rise in the future if they remained loyal during critical moments and/or fought in important battles. Exceptions were given for the Family of the Prophet and those providing special service to Islam, such as gallantry in battle or being an exemplary Muslim (and possibly punishing minor defections). This system of basing an individual's rank in the *diwan* on seniority in Islam continued until the end of the Umayyad period.

This money was not hoarded. The new elite made rich by Islam set up patronage networks of allies and clients, mostly new converts to Islam.³³ These patronage networks reflected old clientelistic institutions that existed in pre-Islamic Arabia but this time the flows of money and loyalties were based upon and dependent upon Islam, not familial relationships and tribal holdings or honor. Pre-Islamic Arabia was an acephalous society and reflected a family-focused political structure. Nobles, usually landlords or wealthy merchants, supported clients, including builders, artisans, but also freed slaves. Political and social alliances were linked underneath through clientelistic bonds between individuals and tribes. In the first century of Islam, converts to Islam became *mawla* (freed slaves, literally 'reborn') and had to locate a patron in an Islamicized 'tribe' (now no longer based solely on familial terms). The character of pre-Islamic clientelistic or patronage networks remained but they now reflected 'Islamic' rather than familial ties.

There were considerable expected benefits for joining the Islamic community, benefits that decreased over time if one hesitated. If too few people converted to Islam,

Hudaybiyyah and continued loyalty during the Ridda Wars; those who fought in Syria after Qadissiyya also received 2000). The third level was for latecomers (*rawadif*) and paid between 200 and 1500 dirhams (1000 for converts between Qadissiyyah and Yarmuk). These increased over time and did not vary between Arabs and the relatively few non-Arab Muslims. Al-Tabari 1985 Vol. XII, p. 199-207.

³³ Marxist scholars are perhaps the most likely to emphasize the creation of a new elite – Islamic Marxists typically see Islam as empowering a new upper-class of rich Muslims who challenged the original rich

the community could easily be wiped out. Economic institutions help explain why so many converted and, having invested in the new Arab/Islamic culture, had an incentive in sustaining it, even after the collapse of the Arab Caliph system. This institutional arrangement *required* further Islamic conquest and expansion because the money distributed through these clientelistic networks came from conquered lands.³⁴

The *diwan* system gave incentives for Arab tribesmen to convert to Islam, convert early, and remain loyal to Islam. A high rank in the *diwan* translated directly into economic and political power and the foundation of this power was forfeited if they exited the Islamic system. If a tribesman revolted against the Islamic system, he could expect to lose his standing in the *diwan* and forfeit the income that sustained his clientelistic networks (i.e. – lose his allies). Tribesmen knew battles would be fought in the future and expected their share of Islamic spoils to increase over time if they remained loyal. They would also expect their pensions to increase considerably if they fought against apostate groups.³⁵ Caliphs may have promised even more rewards to tribesmen who fought apostates than those who fought infidels. The Caliph and authorities frequently punished tribesmen who challenged certain tenets of Islam by decreasing or suspending their *diwan* stipend.³⁶ One strategy for a tribesman interested in identifying other dissatisfied Muslims might be to challenge relatively minor aspects of Islam, such as prohibitions on certain behavior. He might hope to see if others would join

Mercantile elite of Mecca and Medina. The Civil Wars are seen as class warfare between the ‘old segment’ and the ‘new segment.’ The most insightful of these analyses is Ibrahim 1990.

³⁴ In some ways, the distribution of booty in the early Islamic conquests can be analyzed as a pyramid scheme.

³⁵ Hajjaj, for example, gave gifts and increased the pensions of soldiers willing to fight against the Khawarij, a group that could be interpreted as apostates or was a group that may have been seen as likely defectors from the Islamic system in the future. Tritton 1954, p. 170.

³⁶ See Tritton 1954, p. 170-71 for examples in which pensions were stopped as a punishment or raised as a reward.

him and, if supported, ratchet up the level and degree of protest as a prelude to exiting the Islamic system. Tribesmen knew, however, that such minor challenges would likely lead to suspension of their stipend as punishment and, if the behavior continued, more severe reprimands from the Muslim authorities. Testing or exiting the Islamic system, thus, would have had a considerable impact on a tribesman's current and expected future income, both the tribesman and his descendants since there is evidence that the heirs of privileged pensioners were entitled to their pension.³⁷

The *diwan* also facilitated the dissemination of common knowledge regarding who had converted to Islam and the potential consequences of defection. The *diwan* eventually became a public record of who owned what and when they converted. It made it easy for Islamic officials to confiscate property in the event of a revolt and facilitated the identification of allies of rebels. There is evidence that the *diwan* was sometimes used for confiscations (*musadara*).³⁸ The *diwan* was constantly updated. In Egypt by 670, for example, an official went around to immigrant Arabs each morning and inquired about changes in their family status and the arrival of any guests.³⁹

Standing in the *diwan* was common knowledge and served as an indicator of a tribesman's prestige and importance within the wider Muslim community. A high standing in the *diwan* meant that a businessman from Iraq would likely be held in high regard if he traveled to Egypt, Yemen, or elsewhere in the Muslim empire. The *diwan*, therefore, complements the work of scholars on the rise of the West and the cultural foundations of economic institutions and impersonal exchange.⁴⁰ Further inquiry along

³⁷ Moosa 1965, p. 71.

³⁸ *The Encyclopedia of Islam, Vol. II* 1965, p. 324.

³⁹ *The Encyclopedia of Islam, Vol. II* 1965, p. 327.

⁴⁰ See, in particular, North and Thomas 1973 and Greif 1994a.

these lines could shed light on this topic and may help explain the pattern of merchant exchange after the rise of Islam. One possible hypothesis might be that the rise of Islam facilitated anonymous trade between Muslims but did little to promote trade outside the Muslim world since the legal, political, and communicative organizations that facilitated anonymous exchange between Muslims carried no significance for cultural outsiders.

IIB. The rise of garrison towns (*amsar*,⁴¹ Arabic singular *misr*)

As the Muslim empire expanded, ‘Umar devised strategies to keep Arabs separate from the conquered non-Arab populations, which did not convert to Islam until significantly later. Scholars typically attribute this to a desire to prevent dispersal of the Arabs and settlement as a landed aristocracy, maintain a viable military force for further expansion, and to facilitate the establishment of a centralized fiscal system capable of extracting resources from conquered people without exploiting them.⁴² All of these goals required the coexistence and cooperation of diverse Arab tribes. Central to this plan was the development of garrison towns (*amsar*), early settlements that developed out of the armed camps and metropolises of the conquered provinces.⁴³ Examples of these include Kufa and Basra in Iraq, Fustat in Egypt (modern day Cairo), Jabiya in Syria, and Qairawan in Tunisia.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *amsar* has different connotations for different periods. During the period examined here, it refers to the military encampments in the conquered territories which quickly grew into nascent Arab cities.

⁴² See *Kufa* entry in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. V 1986, p. 345-351. Donner sees their purpose as essentially military in nature: establish control over non-Arab populations of conquered areas, defend Arabia from invasion by the Byzantines or Sassanids, and serve as a springboard for further conquests. See Donner 1981, p. 266.

⁴³ See *misr* entry in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. VII 1990, p. 146. In Arabic, *misr* means ‘urban area’, not ‘borders’ as in many Semitic languages, Alsayyad 1991, p. 166 fn. 10.

⁴⁴ Other early Islamic towns, some of which grew out of earlier settlements, include Baghdad, Rayy, Naysabur, Marw, Balkh, and Samarkand.

The development of these cities was critical for the spread of Islamic culture across the disparate and inward-oriented Arab tribes.⁴⁵ Only in cities could tribesmen encounter the frequent interactions necessary for the development of Islamic cultural norms and modes of behavior. Only in cities could consistent and coherent expectations about patterns of behavior and beliefs develop across tribes. City-dwellers learned to predict the behavior of other Muslims in a variety of situations (both on and off the equilibrium path – patterns of behavior and shared expectations about what would happen if someone behaved differently).⁴⁶ If the Arab tribes had interpreted and further developed their new religion independently of one another, we likely would have seen a number of competing ‘Islams.’⁴⁷ Interaction within these new Islamic cities produced similarity through horizontal transmission of culture, especially in schools and attendance at the central mosque.⁴⁸ As will be explained below, ‘Islamic’ interaction was the major source of interaction between members of different tribes. One scholar states,

*“In them [the Islamic garrison towns] the militant Arabs had the chance to assimilate and refine their practices, theology was developed as a system of interpreting Islamic modes of behavior, and Arabic grammar as a symbol of Arabism was written down and codified. This formalized the Arabic language and institutionalized its use as the official tongue for all Muslims for years to come.”*⁴⁹

Kufa, for example, contained large Bedouin clans (such as Tamim and Asad), tribes from the Hijaz (Thaqif, Sulaym, Juhaynah, and Muzaynah), and Yemeni tribes (Hamadan, Hadramawt, Himyar). The development of an Islamic supra-identity across tribes would

⁴⁵ This paper does not argue that Islam is an inherently ‘urban’ religion, a common Orientalist theme. It does, however, argue that repeated contact between people is necessary in order to develop self-reinforcing expectations about each others’ behavior in various situations.

⁴⁶ For a related link between such beliefs and culture, see Greif 1994a.

⁴⁷ As, it can be argued, we see in later eras after the Arab empire collapses. This is perhaps particularly striking regarding relatively isolated Shi’i sects. For more on the development of Shi’i Islam over time, see Momen 1985.

⁴⁸ See Axelrod 1997 for an attempt to develop an agent-based model of this process of cultural transmission through repeated interaction. See Boyd and Richardson 1995 for an examination of horizontal transmission and a review of social science theories regarding cultural transmission.

have been very difficult, if not impossible, if the tribes had dispersed instead of settling into cities. Islam would likely not have survived as a single, coherent cultural identity without urban ‘Islamic’ interaction between tribes. Tribes who returned to the desert to herd, for example, appear to have been more likely than settled tribes to revert to old ways.⁵⁰ Muhammad himself allegedly stated,

*“What I dread for my people is milk, where the devil slips ’twixt foam and teat. Their yearning for it will induce them to return to the desert, forsaking the places where men pray together.”*⁵¹

The cities were also the focal point for drawing in new converts. Only in cities could converts learn how to integrate into Arab Islamic culture.⁵² Moving to a city constituted a personal *hijra* (conversion to Islam) for an Arab. As mentioned above in the *diwan* discussion, converts attached themselves to an Islamicized tribe as a *mawla* and moved into their neighborhood in the city. The population of garrison cities quickly expanded during the period of expansion and conquest from 638-673. Kufa’s population grew from about 30,000 at its founding to roughly 80,000 by the middle of the 7th century⁵³ and 150,000 by 670. Similarly, approximately 200,000 Arabs resided in Basra by 670.

The spatial layout of Kufa

Historians emphasize the role of these garrison cities as forward bases within conquered lands, cities in which conquering Arabs settled instead of seizing the land of locals. Although historians recognize the role of these cities in cementing Muslim control of local populations, their explanations are usually military in nature. This essay argues

⁴⁹ Alsayyad 1991, p. 72.

⁵⁰ Assuming, of course, that no selection bias predetermined the outcome. Tribes that refused to settle in cities may have been more predisposed to apostatize than tribes that did settle.

⁵¹ Weatley 2000, p. 41.

⁵² This point has been made by many scholars analyzing early Islamic cities. See, for example, von Grunebaum 1961, especially the chapter on “The Structure of the Muslim Town.”

that the threat of military force was perhaps less important in ensuring Islamic allegiance from tribesmen than the role of these cities in generating and controlling common knowledge among the Arab tribesmen themselves. In particular, the spatial organization of these cities lowered the probability of defection by making it easy for tribesmen to identify how many other tribes were Muslims but difficult to see how many might be interested in revolting against the Islamic system. This assumes that defection does not happen in a continuous fashion and, because of the expected punishment, would only happen *en masse*.⁵⁴

The non-Arab locals were not likely to revolt without instigation by Arabs. For the most part, they did not convert to Islam until later (widespread conversion to Islam in Persia, for example, only happened 200 years later) but found life much more comfortable under the Muslim empire than it had been under the Byzantines or Sassanid empires. The real risk was Arabs defecting from the Islamic system, possibly with the cooperation of non-Muslim locals.

Kufa will be used as a case study of a *misr* because it is a difficult case. Kufa was a hotbed of political revolt in the 7th century but only revolt within the Islamic system. It is perhaps the most likely spot where we would have expected to see tribes exiting the Islamic system and establishing an independent non-Islamic area of influence in former Sassanid holdings. Kufa was the chief Muslim post in the Sawad, the highly irrigated portion of Mesopotamian lucrative alluvial plain and had been a key source of revenue for the Sassanians.⁵⁵ A local power-broker in Kufa might have been tempted to exit the

⁵³ Weatley 2000, p. 46, 49.

⁵⁴ Conversion and defection are seen as tipping games. An equilibrium, even a 'cultural' one, can switch rapidly and in a non-linear fashion.

⁵⁵ Hodgson 1974, p. 214.

Islamic system and form his own independent empire stretching across Persia to the North and East. Basra or another garrison town could just as aptly be used as a case study but it is especially interesting to examine why a revolt against Islam did *not* happen in Kufa.

Kufa was founded between 636 and 640 (years 15-18 of the Islamic calendar), soon after the Arabs conquered the Sassanid capital of Ctesephton (or al-Mada'n), in order to separate the conquerors from the local population.⁵⁶ The city was deliberately laid out by Abu Al-Haiyaj, probably the first Islamic city-planner.⁵⁷ The governor (*amir*), appointed by the Caliph, oversaw the purposeful pattern of urban development.⁵⁸ The layout and settlement of Kufa was relatively more orderly than that of Basra but otherwise very similar.⁵⁹ The spatial layout of these cities reflects both their Islamic identity and the nomadic tribal identity of the inhabitants.⁶⁰ Both of these factors, I argue, contributed to decrease the probability of defection from Islam by tribesmen. The Islamic center made it easy to see who else had converted while limited interaction between tribal neighborhoods made the identification of potential defectors difficult.

⁵⁶ Primary sources include the account of Sayf ibn 'Umar in al-Tabari, a chapter in al-Baladhani's *Futuh al-Buldan* and three pages in al-Ya'qubi's *Kitab al-Buldan*.

⁵⁷ Alsayyad 1991, p. 56. See description of founding in al-Tabari 1985 vol. XIII, p. 61-77.

⁵⁸ Most scholars agree that the Caliph and governor were in charge of *ikhlat*, a term designating the entire planning and building process. Alsayyad 1991, p. 51. Arguments that the settlers themselves dictated *ikhlat* are usually based on one or two solitary primary source statements.

⁵⁹ Alsayyad 1991 provides reconstructions of both early Basra and Kufa. Kufa would have been more square than Basra and organized into rectangular blocks between roughly perpendicular streets. Most of the description that follows comes from Alsayyad 1991 and al-Tabari 1989, p. 61-77. My map (figure 1) shares similarities with the reconstructions found in Alsayyad but adds information from primary sources not emphasized by urban scholars (such as the location of specific tribes and the homes of Companions).

⁶⁰ The argument presented here attempts to avoid the pitfalls of Orientalist generalizing about 'Islamic' cities in later periods and across regions. For a powerful critique of Orientalist scholarship on 'Islamic' cities, see Abu-Lughod 1987..

Early Kufa was organized as a circle with the Friday Mosque, public treasury,⁶¹ Governor's residence,⁶² and open forum area⁶³ at the center surrounded by a market (*suq*⁶⁴) and possibly the houses of the most important Muslims (i.e. – earliest converts, see the *diwan* discussion above). About nineteen Companions of the Prophet⁶⁵ had their own estate in Kufa.⁶⁶

Radiating out from this central core like spokes from a wheel were tribes learning to live a settled life.⁶⁷ Five main streets⁶⁸ radiated out to the North of the central *sahah*, four to the South, and three each to the East and West.⁶⁹ Narrower side streets jutted out from these main streets, leading to a labyrinth of narrow lanes.⁷⁰ Tribes were assigned and settled into demarcated areas, called *khutat*, between the major marked-out streets.

⁶¹ *bait al-Mal*

⁶² *dar al-imarah*

⁶³ *maydan* or *sahah*

⁶⁴ The early *suq* of Kufa consisted of temporary stalls. Street vendors would hawk their goods by day and leave with their goods at night.

⁶⁵ 'Companions' of the Prophet is a potentially misleading term. 'Companions' traditionally refers to anyone who interacted with or fought alongside the Prophet and does not imply a close, personal relationship. A better term might be 'associates' but Companions is the standard term in the literature. In general, however, Companions were very early converts and were accorded the highest possible status among Muslims (in accordance with the idea of precedence mentioned above).

⁶⁶ Called *dar* or *kati'a*. *The Encyclopedia of Islam, Vol. V* 1986, p. 347 identifies 25 private fiefs but only 19 appear to have been Companions. It is not clear if all of these individual fiefs were adjacent to the city center.

⁶⁷ In many ways, this layout fits the pattern of what Orientalists classify as a typical 'Muslim' city, identified as an inward-oriented city with the Friday Mosque and a market bazaar at its center and avenues radiating out into cul-de-sacs servicing segregated residential communities. See Alsayyad 1991, especially p. 13-41 for a historiography of a typical Muslim city. Also see: Lapidus 1969, Hourani and Stern 1970, Serjeant 1980, and Wheatley 2000. Abu-Lughod 1987 points out that much of this work incorrectly generalizes from cities in the Maghrib to the rest of the Arab world. The argument presented here linking the spatial layout of Muslim cities and common knowledge/revolt has *potential* application elsewhere in the Muslim world over various time periods. It would be interesting to see if the likelihood of revolt in Muslim cities over time (in Damascus, for example) changed as neighborhoods either became less tribal or non-Islamic links increased across tribes and relatively isolated groups. Generalizations of this sort must be careful, however, of assuming the layout of cities across regions of the Arab world are similar.

⁶⁸ *manahej*, Arabic singular *manhej*

⁶⁹ al-Tabari 1985 Vol. XIII, p. 70. Along the 5 Northern avenues were the tribes of Sulaym, Thaqif, Hamadan, Bajilah, Taghlib, and Taym al-Lat. Along the South was the Asad, Nakha, Kindah, and Azd. In the East, the Ansar, Muzaynah, Tamim, Muharib, more Asad, and Amir. The Bajalah, Bajlah, Jadilah, and Juhaynah lived in the Western *khutats*. This is reflected in figure 1.

⁷⁰ Called *zuqaqs*. The main *manahej* were 40 cubits wide (18 meters or 60 feet). The side streets were 20 cubits and the *zuqaqs* were about 7 cubits; Alsayyad 1991, p. 58.

Each *khittah* was, in effect, a self-contained tribal territory. Each tribe subdivided its own *khittah* and had, near its center, an open square called *rahbah*⁷¹ used as a mosque, cemetery, burial ground, and stable. In early Kufa, *rahbah* were the only significant open spaces except for the central ‘Islamic’ area at the center of the city. Since each *rahbah* was at the center of a tribal *khittah*, we can assume that most residents of Kufa only had access to their own tribal *rahbah* and probably rarely if ever ventured through the side streets to reach the *rahbah* of another tribe. These open areas within tribal neighborhoods were used as places of assembly and mobilization, but likely only for intra-tribal organization.⁷² Tribal *khutut* were clearly demarcated and separated. Passways (*turuq*), as well as major streets, separated tribal areas and were principally designed to serve as barriers between *khutut*, not necessarily as streets for movement or circulation.⁷³ *Khutut* became complex and labyrinthine rather quickly.

Buildings in Muslim cities are often specifically designed to guard visual privacy and as defensive space.⁷⁴ Women, for example, probably freely ventured around their tribe’s *khittah*. Urban sociologists have commented on the role of neighborhoods in the social construction of community.⁷⁵ Since neighborhoods were exclusively tribal in early Kufa, the only inter-tribal interaction happened within Islamic contexts – reinforcing the construction of the Islamic community. Ironically, the social construction of an Islamic supra-identity was partly the result of spatial separation of tribes within cities. Mixed neighborhoods would have made it easier for local entrepreneurs to defect from the Islamic system and for different cities to develop significant offshoots of Islam.

⁷¹ Sometimes referred to as *jabbahah*(?).

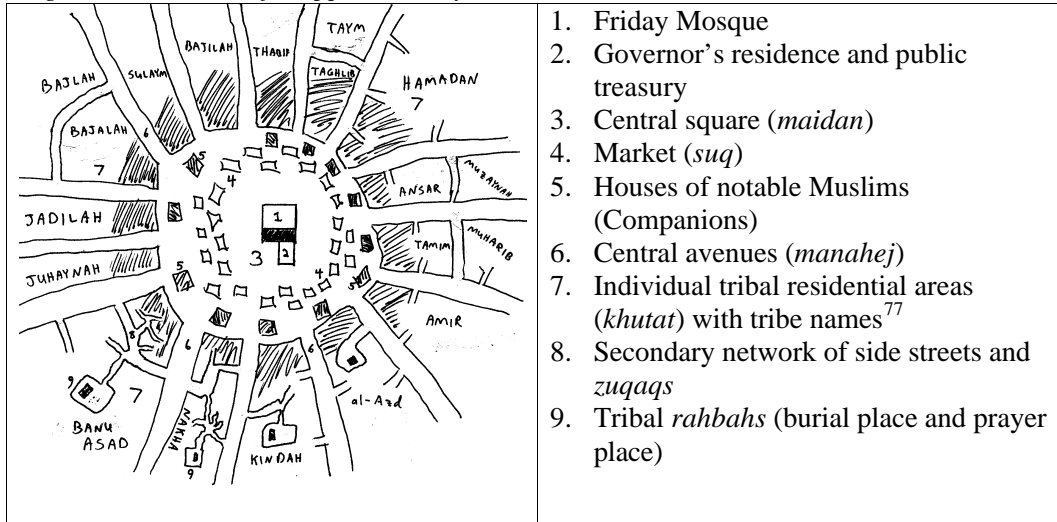
⁷² *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. V 1986, p. 347

⁷³ Alsayyed 1991, p. 51.

⁷⁴ Abu-Lughod 1987. For work on neighborhoods as defensive space, see Newman 1972.

Neighborhoods segregate groups, restrict the range of associations, and develop networks of interaction among its inhabitants. The fact that neighborhoods in early Kufa were exclusively tribal suggests that such associations and networks rarely developed across tribes except for the Islamic networks, which were developed by and overseen by the central authorities.

Figure 1: Central Kufa, approximately 638 A.D.⁷⁶



1. Friday Mosque
2. Governor's residence and public treasury
3. Central square (*maidan*)
4. Market (*suq*)
5. Houses of notable Muslims (Companions)
6. Central avenues (*manahej*)
7. Individual tribal residential areas (*khutat*) with tribe names⁷⁷
8. Secondary network of side streets and *zuqaqs*
9. Tribal *rahbahs* (burial place and prayer place)

The spatial layout of Kufa and the other garrison towns made it easy for tribesmen to see what other tribes were Muslim. As the above map and description indicate, the entire city was focused on the 'Islamic' center, which served as the religious, administrative, and economic heart of the city.⁷⁸ The central forum area was used to

⁷⁵ See, for example, Suttles 1972.

⁷⁶ Map based on reconstructions of Massignon, Al-Janabi, and Alsayyed (see Alsayyed 1991, p. 60-3) and description in al-Tabari 1985, Vol. XIII.

⁷⁷ al-Tabari 1985, Vol. XIII, p 70.

⁷⁸ The *maydan* or center of these cities seems to have played a similar role to the forum areas in Roman cities.

disseminate information, hold formal meetings, and punish troublemakers.⁷⁹ Anyone visiting the government house, central mosque, or shopping in the surrounding markets would witness punishments. This central square, incidentally, was the only state owned property in the city but its centrality was essentially all the state/Muslim authority needed to disseminate common knowledge. All Muslims attended the afternoon sermon at the central mosque on Fridays and the absence of a prominent figure or a tribe would be conspicuous. Purposefully missing the Friday sermon could be used as an expression of dissatisfaction and would certainly draw inquires from concerned Islamic officials. The layout of early Islamic cities resembles an inward-facing circle. Such a layout is perhaps the best way to generate common knowledge and solidarity in large groups.⁸⁰ A recognized and known focal or gathering point usually facilitates coordination. This central area, however, was controlled by the central government, run by a small caucus of *shahyhs* from the Hijaz. By controlling the means of the dissemination of common knowledge and overseeing what was publicly said and done in the square and market, the central authorities made coordination difficult.⁸¹

The spatial layout of the garrison towns also made it difficult for tribesmen to identify which other tribes might be interested in joining a revolt to exit the Islamic system. Kinship, especially bedouin clan, and tribal neighborhood ties continued to dominate social interaction within the towns (such as marriage, inheritance, and business

⁷⁹ Some executions were held in the central square. They may have later been moved out of town to the western caravan area (*kunasa*), used mainly as a market for livestock and slaves. Al-Tabari 1985 vol. XV, p. 46.

⁸⁰ Chwe 2001, especially p. 30-6.

⁸¹ This is a debate among scholars over whether Islamic cities lacked municipal governance over much of the past 1300 years. This article does not speak to these issues and is only concerned with the nascent years of the garrison cities.

partnerships).⁸² Extremely narrow solidarities were maintained within the tribal residential zones. The social organization in the towns reflected the principles of Arab life inherited from the nomadic desert life. There were few non-Islamic links between tribes in the cities. Few institutions cut across neighborhood/tribal boundaries to bind the population together.⁸³ There were few guilds or other merchant, artisan, or non-Islamic associations that linked members of different tribes and, the few that did exist, were very limited.

The only institutions that truly reached across neighborhood/tribal boundaries were almost invariably Islamic in nature. The Islamic schools of law, for example, were probably the most notable cross-neighborhood links between tribesmen. Lapidus writes,

*“In religious terms, a Muslim school of law was the body of legal and moral teachings, based on the Qur’an and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, which is the ultimate expression of Muslim beliefs and the code of proper Muslim behavior. Socially speaking, a school of law was the group of scholars and teachers who elaborated and preserved the law, and the witnesses and judges who supervised its implementation in the community at large.”*⁸⁴

Although the most significant period for the development of Muslim schools of law was years later,⁸⁵ the only ties cutting across neighborhood boundaries in early Kufa were probably very similar in nature – lectures and schools based on interpreting Islamic law in order to articulate the ‘code of proper Muslim behavior.’ Cross-tribal interaction was largely through loosely organized religious bodies such as *ulama* study groups, circles of scholars, religious schools, mosques, and Sufi brotherhoods.

⁸² Lapidus 1973, p. 28.

⁸³ Lapidus 1966, p. 9. Lapidus writes, in this work, on social solidarities in Aleppo and Damascus but Kufa was similar, especially in the early years.

⁸⁴ Lapidus 1966, p. 10.

⁸⁵ Schools of law became, by the 11th century, the “fundamental institutions of Middle Eastern urban society.” Lapidus 1973, p. 46.

The only other place where inter-tribal interaction frequently took place was in the marketplace. Most inter-tribal trade took place in the central market, near the mosque, which stretched from the *maydan* north to the *khittah* of Thaqif. This mosque-market layout is not unique. European cities, for example, were often defined by a central cathedral and nearby marketplace.⁸⁶ As previously mentioned, trade done in the shadow of the mosque was easier for the central authorities to monitor.

As additional tribes moved to Kufa, they settled in their own tribal *khittah* behind earlier immigrants. The pattern of settlement and growth, therefore, emanated out of the center in concentric rings. This implies that those Muslims with the greatest stake in the preservation of the Islamic system (the earliest converts and residents) were located closest to the center of the city, the key focal point for the dissemination of common knowledge and mass coordination. Although the first-comers were surrounded by late-comers (potential revolutionaries), it would have been very difficult for disgruntled tribes to coordinate their actions around the edges of an ever-expanding circle without controlling the decidedly 'Islamic' center. Newly arriving tribes stayed at a reception station area (*manakh*) until they were assigned a permanent tribal *khittah*.

Even if two or more tribes were able to identify each other's dissatisfaction with the Islamic system, coordinate and ally together, and rebel against the Islamic system, sustained cooperation between the rebellious tribes would be difficult. During the wars of *rida*, for example, a leader of an apostate group in Yemen, Amr ibn Madi Karib of Zubaid, kidnapped his fellow apostate rebel and ally Zais ibn Makshouh and turned him over to the advancing Muslim army mobilized against them in an attempt to prove his

⁸⁶ Abu-Lughod 1987, p. 156.

rediscovered loyalty.⁸⁷ Tribes exiting the Islamic system would find it more difficult to cooperate and make credible commitments to one another than tribes operating under an Islamic cultural and institutional framework of shared norms, rules, and enforcement mechanisms.

The coming of Islam also eradicated many of the pre-Islamic focal points potential revolutionaries could have coordinated upon. Muslims adopted a new calendar, based upon the *hijra* of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622, and old festivals and gathering points associated with old religious sects were destroyed.⁸⁸ The Muslim community even adopted a new method of calling the community together during this time. While Christians typically used bells and Jewish communities blew a horn, the Mu'azzin of Islam called the faithful to prayer. Private names from Jewish, Christian, or pre-Islamic traditions were prohibited and the new holy day for Muslims was Friday, instead of the Christian Sunday or Jewish Saturday.⁸⁹ The prohibition on all of these potential anti-Islamic focal points made it very costly for any tribesmen to attempt to unilaterally coordinate on them. Potential revolutionaries in contemporary China often coordinate on anniversaries commemorating the passing of key figures or previous rebellions. Chinese citizens mourning the death of Zhou Enlai in 1976, for example, went from laying wreathes to protesting against the government (leading to reforms). The spontaneous memorial in honor of Hu Yaobang in early April 1989 stimulated Chinese students to take over Beijing's central square. Similarly, East Germans in Leipzig wishing to join a mass demonstration were able to coordinate on small protest marches

⁸⁷ Glubb 1963, p. 118.

⁸⁸ Relatively extreme breakaway groups later in Islam (who could be interpreted to have exited the Islamic system) often adopted entirely new calendars, including the Druze, Alawi, and Baha'i. Lazarus-Yafeh 1981, p. 12.

everyone knew were held every Monday.⁹⁰ In contrast, it would have been very costly for tribesmen to try to stimulate a revolt by sounding a Jewish horn or assembling at a destroyed Christian holy site on a Sunday. Everyone knew that such an act was prohibited as an affront and, if not enough people coordinated, the expected punishment from the Muslim authorities would be fast and furious. Jews and Christians were expelled from the Arabian Peninsula during 'Umar's reign and the garrison towns were, as mentioned above, set away from local populations. An Islamic tribe seeking to exit the Islamic system would need to identify other dissatisfied Muslims, a difficult task, I argue, because of the spatial organization of urban centers. Islam and Islamic focal points were, quite literally, the only game in town.

III. Conclusion

In his study of the early Islamic conquests, Fred Donner writes, "*The victory of the Islamic state over the bodies and minds of Arabia could hardly have been more complete.*"⁹¹ The micro-level analysis presented here of the incentives facing individual tribesmen in Arabia in the first century of Islam suggests that Donner is over-simplifying what happened. An Islamic super-identity was created and sustained through deliberate political engineering that relied heavily on the manipulation of pre-existing tribal identities and the creation of new clientelistic networks. It is not that potential separatists from the fledgling Islamic state could not imagine an alternative, they remained loyal to Islam because they could not identify a sufficiently large group of potential collaborators. This dynamic is not unique to seventh century Arabia. It is commonly argued, for example, that no separatist warlords emerged in 1920s China because no alternative

⁸⁹ Lazarus-Yafeh 1981, p. 13.

⁹⁰ Lohmann 1994 and Kuran 1995, p. 270.

could be imagined due to longevity of the state. The analysis presented here suggests that political incentives and common knowledge may have made it difficult for potential separatists to collectively mobilize.⁹²

Almost all of the explanations in the existing literature treat the rise and success of Islam as deterministic. Scholars from the Islamic world often argue Islam spread quickly because of divine guidance (quite literally, *Insha' Allah*) and the spiritual and ideological bankruptcy of pre-Islamic society. Their explanations, rarely challenged for religious reasons, do not explain the historical pattern of revolt, particularly the revolt of many tribes immediately after the Prophet's death. The traditional argument of Orientalist scholars⁹³ is that Islam spread by the sword, either through superior techniques, leadership, or motivation. One scholar argues, "*Muhammad had to conquer, his followers liked to conquer, and his deity told him to conquer: do we need any more [explanation]?*"⁹⁴ Although such explanations properly emphasize the vulnerability of the Byzantine and Sassanid empires, these arguments fail to account for the durability of Islamic institutions, especially after the Muslim empire fractured internally. Finally, the most compelling research program in the existing literature emphasizes the new role of Islam in organizing the Arab armies. Cooperation under Islam was more efficient than organization by tribe and may help explain where and why Islam expanded.⁹⁵ There are no satisfactory micro-level explanations for why allegiance to Islam became a cultural

⁹¹ Donner 1981, p. 276.

⁹² I thank David Laitin for drawing the comparison to my attention.

⁹³ For a discussion, see Said 1979.

⁹⁴ Crone 1987, p. 244.

⁹⁵ Significant work remains to be done on this. Most of the existing work emphasizes military strategy and largely ignores the economies of scale issue. A full investigation of the Arab conquests would examine where Islam expanded successfully to and where the conquests stalled. My intuition is that Islamic organization was still not efficient enough to rule all of the conquered areas or to overcome non-tribal forces (in Europe and the far East).

equilibrium in these early years and I have yet to locate work that directly addresses the puzzle identified in this paper. One leading scholar on the Islamic conquests states,

*“the true causes of the Islamic conquests – currents in the minds of men – will probably remain forever beyond the grasp of historical analysis.”*⁹⁶

This paper suggests the tools of modern social science combined with historical analysis help us understand the incentives and behavior of tribesmen during this crucial period.⁹⁷

The argument presented here moves in a different direction than the existing literature. I have argued that the durability of Islam was not predetermined and that revolt from the Islamic system was a serious threat in the first century of Islam. In his seminal work on the rise of Islam, Marshall Hodgson identifies two counterfactual outcomes that could have happened in lieu of the rise of Islam: either continuing waves of prophetic leadership leading to a fragmented bedouin Arabia or assimilation of the fledgling Islamic religion into the wider Jewish community.⁹⁸ This paper begins to explain why Islam remained united and independent and was not absorbed (and instead did significant absorbing of other cultures).

Political entrepreneurs, such as ‘Umar, recognized the risk of exit and devised political institutions, built upon institutional elements from pre-Islamic society, that affected the incentives of individual tribesmen to defect from the Islamic system. It is important to explain why the opposition during this early period remained an Islamic opposition. I believe significant insight can be shed on early Islamic history by focusing on such micro-level incentives and the development of common knowledge instead of broad, seemingly pre-determined social and religious movements. In particular, a good

⁹⁶ Donner1981, p. 271. Also note Donner’s somewhat contradictory statement above.

⁹⁷ For more on this developing methodological tradition, see Bates et al. 1998 and a critique in Elster 2000.

⁹⁸ Hodgson1974, p. 198.

institutional explanation for the rise of Islam and the pattern of expansion has yet to be written. This would continue in the tradition of North's work on the rise of the West and complement recent comparative attempts to explain why the West colonized the world while other cultures, such as one from the Islamic world, did not.⁹⁹ Most importantly, historical work on the Islamic world by economic historians and political scientists will unpack a complex region of the world often ignored by social scientists and provide valuable comparisons with other regions. In this paper, I have tried to demonstrate that even a historical event as complex and fundamental as the rise of Islam can be examined in fresh and exciting ways that yield insights of interest to social scientists and historians alike.

⁹⁹ See, for example, Abernethy 2000.

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