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The Umayyad Legacy: How Did Damascus Rule Three Continents?

The Umayyads were brought back to the forefront of public debate with the liberation of Damascus from the Assad regime in late 2024, not as a dynasty of the past, but as part of the memory and identity of Bilad al-Sham, one long marginalized, and even scorned and vilified by the Assad regime and its allies.

This report is the first in a series within the “Legacy of Banu Umayya” file, through which Noon Post offers a focused reading of the Umayyad experience as the first Arab project for building a state and a capital, and as a pivotal moment in Islamic and world history between 661 and 750 CE, when a vast empire encompassing multiple peoples and cultures was governed from Damascus.

The “Legacy of Banu Umayya” file is less concerned with recounting events than with questioning their meaning: How are capitals made? How does a place become a center of influence? And how can a role be reclaimed without replicating the past? It is a reading of history through the eyes of the present, placing Damascus once again before the question of statehood, city, and identity.

In the summer of 634 CE, Damascus opened its gates to a new political scene, closing the chapter of Byzantine rule and beginning a different phase in the

history of Bilad al-Sham. Yet the transformation did not fully take hold until two years later, when the Battle of Yarmouk settled the balance of power in the region, firmly establishing Islamic sovereignty and ushering Bilad al-Sham into a new era of its history.

Its governorship was first entrusted to Yazid ibn Abi Sufyan, and after his death in 639 CE, he was succeeded by his brother Muawiya. From among the city's alleys and walls, a new center of gravity began to take shape: a more orderly administration, and a Bilad al-Sham consolidating around a single leadership. From Damascus, the nucleus of a stable political authority emerged, one that would later provide Muawiya with the base from which he advanced toward the caliphate.

Then in 661 CE (41 AH), after al-Hasan ibn Ali relinquished power, Muawiya entered Kufa declaring the Year of Unity, and the Islamic provinces were united under his authority. Thus began the era of the Umayyad state, and with the transfer of the center of the caliphate to Damascus, the city was transformed from a regional metropolis into a major political capital.

From there, the Umayyads governed a state that stretched from the borders of China in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west, encompassing peoples, religions, and languages that had never before been brought together under a single center. In just one century, the Umayyads built an empire larger in extent than the Roman Empire. The Umayyad era was pivotal in shaping the history of both the world and Islam.

More than thirteen centuries later, Syrians recalled this legacy and brought it back to the forefront with the liberation of Damascus in December 2024, making it an event of profound symbolic significance. It was not merely the fall of the Assad regime, but a reopening of the question of identity and memory, invoking the Umayyad legacy as a living reservoir of dignity and pride.

Damascus and the Invention of the Center: A Capital Ruling Three Continents

Damascus was no ordinary city in the ancient world. Its location on the land bridge between Asia and Africa, and its connection to the Mediterranean basin, gave it a pivotal role in overland trade networks, making it a major hub for caravans between the Arabian Peninsula, Bilad al-Sham, Egypt, and Mesopotamia.

From this strategic position, the city acquired economic weight and military importance. That is why major empires succeeded one another in controlling it, from the Assyrians and Babylonians to the Persians, then the Romans and Byzantines. Despite its demographic and economic prosperity under Roman and Byzantine rule, Damascus remained a regional administrative center within a

broader imperial system, without becoming the seat of supreme political decision-making, which remained in Rome and later Constantinople.

This reality changed radically in 661 CE with the establishment of the Umayyad state and the choice of Damascus as the capital of the caliphate. The decision was not merely administrative, but a conscious founding act based on its relatively secure location, its proximity to the Byzantine front, its administrative experience, and its trade networks. From that point on, Damascus became a political and administrative center leading a vast state, and an early model of an Arab capital managing great human and cultural diversity.

The centralization that emerged in the Umayyad era was not built from scratch, but was an extension of a process that began under Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab, when the first foundations for organizing the state were laid through the division of provinces, the appointment of governors, the regulation of tax collection, the establishment of diwans, and the principle of accountability before the caliph.

After Damascus was declared the capital of the caliphate, Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan worked to develop and strengthen this framework. The centrality of the caliphate became firmly established as the head of political, military, and religious authority, and the state was divided into provinces governed by emirs appointed by the caliph, who were responsible for collecting taxes and transferring them to the treasury, overseeing security, defending the frontiers, managing military affairs, and supporting conquests. The emir did not possess a large independent military force, but relied instead on respect, social standing, and his ability to influence tribes and exploit divisions among them.

The Umayyad caliph, meanwhile, was the head of state, commander-in-chief, and the religious and judicial Reference, with direct authority to appoint governors, judges, and commanders, all of whom were accountable to him. In major cities such as Kufa, Basra, and Fustat, responsibilities were distributed among the governor, the tax official, the judge, and the chief of police.

Syria and Upper Mesopotamia (al-Jazira) were directly subject to the caliph's authority, while the other provinces included Egypt; Iraq with its two cities, Kufa and Basra; Persia and Khurasan; Armenia and Azerbaijan; Bahrain and Oman; the Hijaz and Yemen; and others. At times, several regions were placed under the authority of a single governor.

Yet the vast geographic scope and the diversity of political and military conditions—especially in North Africa—posed particular challenges. Geographic distance and the complexity of tribal and military conditions required administrative reorganization. After Ifriqiya had been administered from Egypt, it became a province in its own right in 705 CE, and was itself divided into administrative units such as Ifriqiya, Tripoli, al-Zab, and al-Sus, each overseen by deputies under whom smaller districts, each with its own local commander, were organized.

At the same time, new urban centers with military and administrative functions were established, such as Kairouan in Ifriqiya, Wasit in Iraq, and Ramla in Palestine, alongside the preservation and development of many earlier administrative structures.

Thus the state's reach expanded rapidly: eastward through Persia and Khurasan to Transoxiana and Sindh; northward to Armenia and the Caucasus; and

westward to Ifriqiya and then al-Andalus in 711 CE. Meanwhile, the Red Sea became a commercial artery linking Egypt with the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, and South Asia, while the campaigns against Constantinople marked the height of confrontation with Byzantium at the beginning of the eighth century.

By 750 CE, the Umayyad state had reached its greatest extent, from al-Andalus in the west to the borders of Central Asia in the east, and from the Caucasus in the north to the depths of Africa in the south. Damascus remained at the heart of this expanse, transformed from a commercial crossroads into an imperial capital that offered the first Arab model for governing vast lands inhabited by multiple peoples and regions.

Institutions of Umayyad Rule: How Was a Vast Empire Governed from Damascus?

The administrative structure of the Umayyad era rested on foundations laid during the caliphate of Umar ibn al-Khattab. With the rise of the Umayyad state, this framework was further developed by Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, who strengthened its mechanisms, before it underwent a qualitative transformation under Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan.

Administration and Communications

Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan worked to develop the administrative frameworks that had taken shape in the previous period, establishing the Diwan of Correspondence and Writing to oversee communications between the caliph and his governors and provincial commanders. The head of the diwan was chosen from among the caliph’s close circle because of the sensitivity of the information he handled. Over time, the diwan developed into a fully integrated institution that included specialized scribes for drafting, editing, and archiving, along with records and files preserving correspondence.

To ensure the confidentiality of documents and prevent forgery, Muawiya established the Diwan of the Seal, which sealed the caliph’s letters with an engraved seal guaranteeing the authenticity of the messages. As the caliphate expanded, the need arose for a rapid means of communication between Damascus and the provinces, leading to the establishment of the Diwan of the Post, which relied on a network of stations equipped with horses and riders who took turns carrying letters and reports, including the caliph’s directives and sometimes the transport of commanders or troops.

Under Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, the postal network was improved and became more effective, evolving into an integrated infrastructure that combined institutional organization with a supervisory role over conditions in the provinces. This consolidated Damascus as a strong administrative center governing a vast

empire through an efficient and reliable communications network.

Law and Judiciary

In the earliest period of Islam, the caliphs personally undertook the task of judging and settling disputes among people. Umar ibn al-Khattab sought to organize this function institutionally, delegating judicial authority to specialized judges in the provinces.

As the Umayyad state expanded and Arabs mixed with other peoples, the need for greater organization and codification emerged. Judges such as Sulaym ibn Anz in Egypt began documenting judicial rulings, and under Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, the Mazalim judiciary system emerged to examine complex cases, especially those involving notables and nobles. Courts were convened under the presidency of the caliph, the governor, or their deputy, with difficult cases referred to specialized judges such as Ibn Idris al-Azdi, as narrated by Omar Abu al-Nasr in his book The Arab Umayyad Civilization in Damascus.

Judicial administration gradually developed, with caliphs and governors appointing judges who were accountable to them, while local populations participated in maintaining order, with governors able to intervene when necessary. The Umayyad state also issued judicial decrees to unify procedures.

On another level, the Umayyads established the hisba judiciary to oversee public facilities and prevent legal violations. There were specialized muhtasibs in each area to monitor markets, weights and measures, roads, and public buildings, and to ensure compliance with the public interest, without intervening in private disputes.

In jurisprudential terms, ijtihad remained broad before the crystallization of the four schools of law. Important imams emerged, such as Abd al-Rahman al-Awza‘i, who contributed to laying down clear jurisprudential and judicial foundations, while toward the end of the Umayyad era two imams appeared who would later become founders of two of the four legal schools: Abu Hanifa in Iraq and Malik ibn Anas in Medina.

Security and the Military

The organization of military affairs in the Islamic state began under Umar ibn al-Khattab in 20 AH/641 CE, when he established the Diwan al-Jund to organize lists of fighters and register their stipends and names. As the Umayyad state expanded, the need arose to strengthen the security structure, so Muawiya introduced specialized bodies: the chamberlain to regulate access to the caliph and protect the court, the guard to secure the caliph, and the police to maintain public order and enforce rulings.

At first, the police were linked to the judiciary, but they gradually became independent in handling crimes and carrying out punishments. The chief of police was responsible for maintaining order and public security. Among the most prominent to hold this post was Nusayr, father of Musa ibn Nusayr, the conqueror of al-Andalus.

The Umayyads also sought to develop the army and raise its efficiency. Arabs were initially recruited, and with the expansion of the conquests into North Africa and al-Andalus, Berbers were incorporated and integrated with the Arab troops. In the early Marwanid period, military centralization was strengthened, replacing tribal structures with a system more subordinate to central authority, giving rise to a more organized army capable of moving across several fronts.

An illustrative image of Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan overseeing the first Islamic fleet

On the naval front, Muawiya is credited with establishing the Islamic fleet to control the coasts and confront the Byzantines, capturing islands in the eastern Mediterranean such as Arwad and Rhodes, restoring coastal fortresses in Acre and Tyre, and building new fortifications, while settling loyal elements to ensure the stability of coastal cities. Maritime activity also extended into the Red Sea, which became a hub for trade, pilgrimage seasons, and a link between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean.

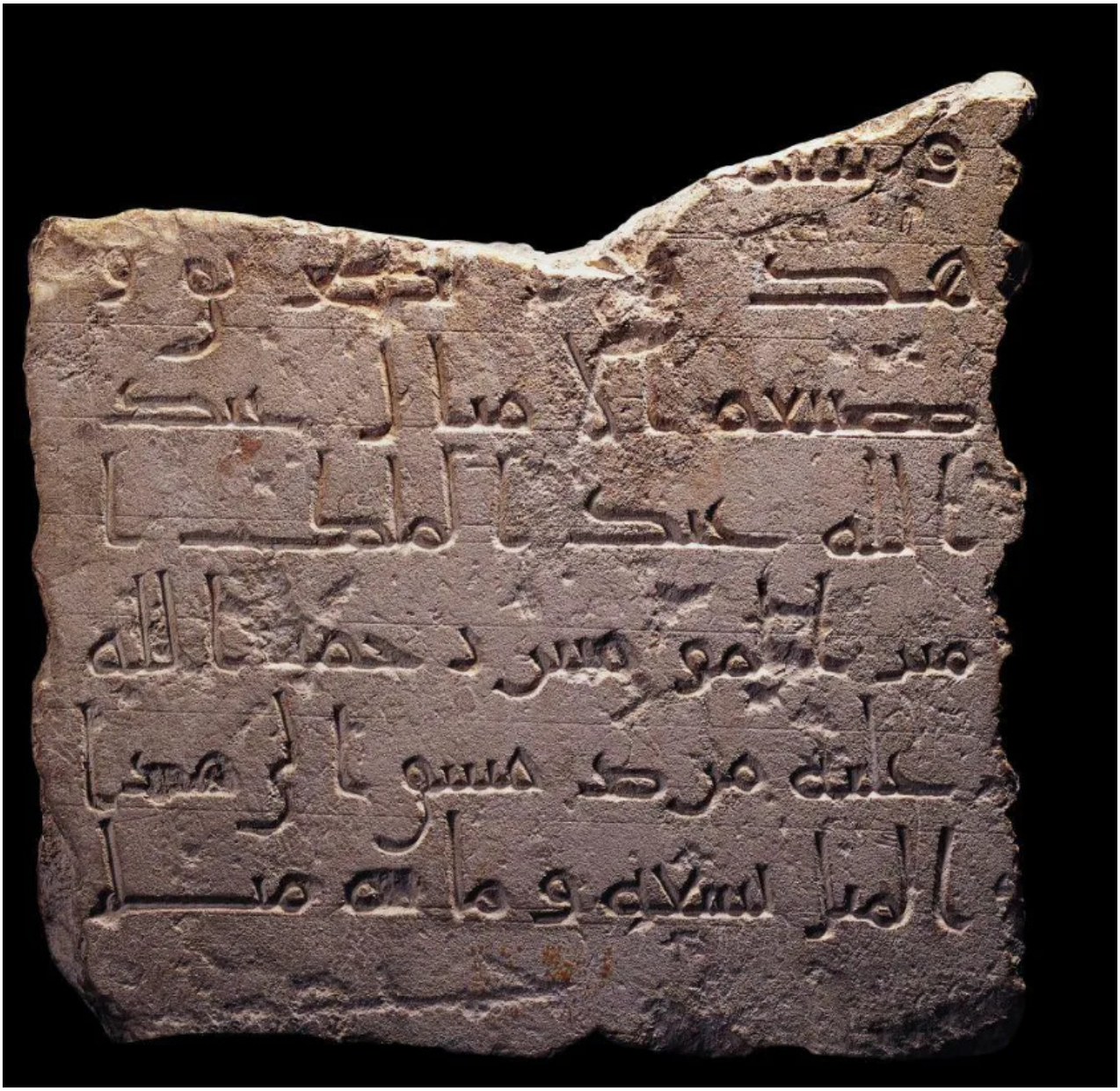
During the Umayyad era, military campaigns continued on multiple fronts: northward against the Byzantines, westward to Ifriqiya, the Maghreb, and then al-Andalus, and eastward to Sindh, alongside strengthening the army's centralization and linking it to authority in order to ensure control over the vast provinces and manage the conquests efficiently.

Revenue and Financial Affairs

The organization of financial affairs in the Islamic state began under Umar ibn al-Khattab with the establishment of the Diwan al-Kharaj, drawing on Persian administrative systems. The diwan oversaw public resources, including taxes, levies, and soldiers' salaries, with each region relying on its own administrative language. This financial structure continued to grow during the reign of Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, and the diwan became the main pillar for financing the state and its army, including revenues from zakat, jizya, and kharaj.

The greatest transformation came under Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, when internal wars and Byzantine threats imposed comprehensive financial and administrative reforms. These reforms included restricting salary payments to active soldiers only, reorganizing tax systems, minting an independent Islamic currency, and Arabizing the diwans.

The tax base was also expanded to include all landowners, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. In his book The Political and Civilizational History of the Umayyad Era, Ibrahim Za'rour recounts that precise surveys and population registers were conducted in Syria between 697–698 CE, and in al-Jazira and Egypt between 706–711 CE to ensure fair and effective collection. The kharaj official remained among the most important financial authorities in the provinces, overseeing revenues and submitting reports directly to Damascus.



A stone marker used to determine distances on pilgrimage or trade routes, dating back to the reign of the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (685–705 CE). (Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts)

Omar Abu al-Nasr noted in his book The Arab Umayyad Civilization in Damascus that the Umayyad treasury spent large sums on improving canals and waterways from rivers such as the Tigris and Euphrates to carry water to distant lands, on digging canals for agriculture, and also on providing food and clothing for prisoners and prisoners of war.

The Umayyad experience shows that what made Damascus an exceptional capital of one of the greatest empires in history was—alongside its symbolism and location—its ability to govern the state from a clear decision-making center, connect distant peripheries, and build effective institutions that organized the

political and administrative sphere.

Thus, the lesson of history for Bilad al-Sham today is that restoring political and cultural influence begins with building a clearly defined central authority capable of producing an inclusive identity, with administrative flexibility that allows for managing social and cultural diversity within a cohesive national framework, alongside reviving markets and commercial infrastructure and activating regional and international connectivity networks, thereby restoring to Damascus its function not merely as a city linking the Mashriq and the Maghreb, but as the civilizational and political heart of the region.

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