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Despite Its Civilizational Achievements, Why Did the Umayyad State Fall?

Over the course of a century (661–750 CE), the Umayyads occupied a central place in world history after extending their dominion from the Atlantic coasts in the west to the frontiers of Central Asia in the east. Amid this geographic expansion, the Umayyads built a modern state by the standards of their time, establishing an advanced monetary system, and leading a historic project to Arabize the administrative bureaus, transforming the caliphate into an economic and political power.

But while the state was at the height of its glory, its internal fractures were deepening politically and socially. Its fall in 750 CE was not the result of a sudden failure, but rather of the convergence of several factors, beginning with internal disputes within the Umayyad house and tribal conflicts, and ending with the intensification of ideological opposition and revolts that gnawed away at the body of the state.

The Fragmentation of the Umayyad House

The final decades of Umayyad rule witnessed fierce struggles within the ruling house due to the absence of a stable mechanism for the transfer of power. With

the death of Caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik, divisions within the Umayyad family became more exposed, and Bilad al-Sham turned into an arena of internal conflict known as the Third Fitna.

The crisis reached its peak with the killing of Caliph al-Walid ibn Yazid, an event that shattered the prestige of the caliphate and undermined its majesty in the eyes of the populace and the soldiers. This assassination plunged the Umayyad family into a bitter internal struggle that tore it apart and weakened the grip of central authority in an unprecedented way.

It can be said that the decline of Umayyad authority began with the brothers' struggle over the caliphate and the emergence of signs of division and factionalism within the Umayyad house. After they had been one party against anyone seeking to diminish their sovereignty and seize their caliphate, they became rival factions, each working to destroy the other.

Many historians also devote considerable attention to the Umayyads' luxury, indulgence in pleasures, and wasteful spending. In many sources, some caliphs are associated with images of excess and opulence. In his book "The Umayyad State: Factors of Prosperity and Repercussions of Collapse," Dr. Ali al-Sallabi paints a picture of this reality, explaining that Umayyad life was marked by extravagance in housing, clothing, gifts, and expenditures.

Tribal Partisanship

At its outset, the Umayyad state relied on tribal alliances as a fundamental pillar for consolidating its rule. Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan excelled at containing those tribal conflicts, but the later Umayyad caliphs pursued increasingly partisan tribal policies whose effects spread to all provinces and across administrative, political, and economic life, ultimately becoming one of the dangerous factors behind the destruction of the Umayyad presence.

Al-Sallabi argues in "The Umayyad State" that the dynasty's fall was the result of a "fatal mistake" committed by many Umayyad caliphs, manifested in stoking tribal partisanship by favoring one group over another. This division split the popular base in Bilad al-Sham into two hostile camps: the Qaysis (northern Arabs) and the Yemenis (southern Arabs).

In reality, tribal rivalry became the main driver behind the selection of caliphs themselves in the final years of the Umayyad state. While Yazid III relied on Yemeni support, Marwan II relied on the Qaysis.

Ideological and Legitimacy-Based Opposition

The seeds of ideological and political conflict began with the Umayyads' attempt to reshape power by adopting the principle of hereditary succession starting in

60 AH/679 CE. This political shift was the first target of opposition from all its currents, as opponents viewed it as a departure from shura, creating a crisis of legitimacy that accompanied the state through most of its phases and became fuel for many subsequent revolts.

Al-Sallabi believes that the martyrdom of al-Husayn ibn Ali was the most important turning point in the history of ideological opposition to Umayyad rule.

The impact of this event was not limited to intensifying Shiism among the Shiites and unifying their ranks; its importance also lies in the fact that before al-Husayn's killing, Shiism had merely been a political opinion, but after his death it became a firmly rooted creed. Nor was the intellectual and doctrinal divergence between Sunnis and Shiites after al-Husayn's death the only consequence; the Shiites themselves split into factions after his killing.

And since 670 CE, Kufa witnessed a number of movements aimed at overthrowing the Umayyads and appointing one of Ali ibn Abi Talib's relatives. Shiite opposition took Kufa as its center, and over time this current developed to include intellectual and political beliefs.

Parallel to the Shiite movement, the Kharijites emerged as a revolutionary force that rejected the Umayyad model altogether, and their movement reached its peak during the reign of Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan. Their factions (such as the Azariqa, Najdat, Sufriyya, and Ibadiyya) spread across the empire, from al-Yamama and Basra to Mosul and Oman. Despite Umayyad military successes in suppressing Kharijite uprisings, they caused a constant drain on the state's resources and forces.

These historical accumulations—foremost among them the martyrdom of al-Husayn—were transformed into powerful instruments of emotional mobilization against the Umayyads, which Abbasid propaganda exploited to recruit supporters and organize the movement's ranks.

The Erosion of the Peripheries and the Beginning of Geographic Retreat

The countdown to the fall of the Umayyad caliphate began in the distant provinces as a result of certain financial policies. In Khurasan, early revolts erupted (734–746 CE) under the leadership of al-Harith ibn Surayj in protest against tax policies, including the reimposition of the poll tax on the mawali. At the same time, the year 740 CE witnessed the eruption of the "Berber Revolt" in North Africa, which led to large parts of the Maghreb slipping from Umayyad control.

In Khurasan, the Abbasid movement exploited the state of popular unrest caused by financial grievances and succeeded in winning the support of the resentful

mawali. Because of Khurasan's geographic remoteness and Caliph Marwan II's preoccupation with the raging internal conflicts in Iraq and Syria, the central authority was unable to contain this growing danger in the east.

Within a few years of Marwan ibn Muhammad's attempt to restore control over the central provinces, he faced an organized Abbasid revolt launched from Khurasan under the leadership of Abu Muslim al-Khurasani. Owing to the broad participation of the mawali, along with the tight organization of the Abbasid revolution, Abbasid forces managed to achieve successive victories over the Umayyad armies, which had been torn apart by divisions. These victories culminated in the decisive Battle of the Zab in 750 CE, where Marwan ibn Muhammad was defeated and the curtain finally fell on the Umayyad caliphate.

Coercive Tax Collection

The economy of the Umayyad state relied on a tax system that included kharaj (land tax), the poll tax, in addition to other in-kind and cash taxes. However, this system faced mounting challenges in the late Umayyad period, as the authorities failed to adapt their fiscal policies to the demographic changes resulting from large numbers of people converting to Islam.

As Omar Abu al-Nasr recounts in his book The Arab Umayyad Civilization in Damascus, the decade between 715 and 724 CE represented a decisive turning point in the history of the Umayyad state, as demographic shifts and the spread of Islam among the local population (the mawali) led to a decline in tax revenues that had depended on non-Muslims.

The Umayyad era, especially during the period of Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, witnessed a marked rise in financial burdens. The jizya was increased by three dinars per person, and exceptional taxes were imposed that weighed heavily on the population. This crisis was worsened by the practices of some governors who turned their offices into a means of enrichment and profiteering.

The first signs of fiscal dysfunction also appeared with deviations in the collection of "kharaj," beginning with its imposition on lands that had been exempt under the terms of peace treaties. Likewise, in the final decades of Umayyad rule, the state tried to compensate for the financial deficit through a major expansion in the application of the poll tax.

Al-Sallabi explains in "The Umayyad State" that these tax measures, accompanied by the use of violence in collection, transformed the tax system from a tool for building the state into fuel for revolts against it.

Devastating Plagues

The challenges did not stop there. These financial pressures coincided with

waves of recurring plagues that had a major impact on the state. Among the noteworthy studies on this subject is that of Dr. Ahmed al-Adawi, who presented a new reading of the fall of the Umayyad state, favoring the theory of demographic change through devastating plagues and deadly diseases as a fundamental factor in the Umayyads' collapse.

These plagues caused a shortage of soldiers and fighters, especially among the Arabs on whom the state primarily depended. Al-Adawi continues to present analyses supporting his theory, saying that the Abbasid rebels chose the right moment to declare their revolt during two major plagues that struck Bilad al-Sham and Iraq between 127 and 131 AH. He goes even further, arguing that the plague of 131 AH deprived Marwan ibn Muhammad, the last Umayyad caliph, of the ability to send reinforcements to his governor in Khurasan to halt the Abbasid advance.

Writing History in the Shadow of the Victor

The Abbasids did not confront a cohesive state; rather, they benefited from the existing cracks that had weakened the Umayyads. With the fall of the capital, Damascus, in 750 CE, a chapter of nearly a century of Umayyad rule came to a close, yet its political and intellectual legacy continues to provoke debate to this day.

The fall of the Umayyad state was not merely a political transfer of power, but a systematic eradication of the Umayyad presence. It began with bloody massacres, most notably the "massacre of the Abu Futrus River," where the Abbasids lured the Umayyads with promises of safety and then brutally killed them. This purge extended to material symbols and spatial memory: the walls of Damascus were demolished, and the graves of the caliphs were exhumed, including that of Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik, whose body was reportedly flogged and burned.

The Abbasids also sought to erase the Umayyads' visual legacy by removing their names from the foundation inscriptions of great buildings. One of the clearest examples is what the Abbasid caliphs (such as al-Mahdi and al-Ma'mun) did in removing the names of the founders of the Umayyad state from inscriptions, such as the removal of the foundation inscription in the Dome of the Rock, where al-Ma'mun replaced the name of Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan with his own. Similar attempts also took place in the Prophet's Mosque.

Attempts to undermine the Umayyad legacy reached their peak in 211 AH, when Caliph al-Ma'mun issued an order to curse Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan and punish anyone who mentioned Muawiya favorably or praised him. Al-Tabari reports that al-Ma'mun intended to generalize this measure throughout the state through

letters sent to his governors ordering them to curse Muawiya in Friday sermons, but his advisers ultimately dissuaded him from the project for fear that the initiative would provoke popular anger.

In reality, a negative image of the Umayyads took shape in the Abbasid era, portraying them as kings immersed in luxury and wine and accusing them of turning the caliphate into a despotic hereditary monarchy modeled on Byzantine and Sasanian patterns. These criticisms were transmitted by historians and litterateurs such as al-Jahiz in some of his epistles, al-Tabari in History of Prophets and Kings, and al-Maqrizi in his book on conflict and rivalry between the Umayyads and the Banu Hashim. These criticisms can be classified into three categories: those related to the Umayyads' past, their assumption of the caliphate, and their exercise of power.

Dr. al-Sallabi believes that the history of the Umayyad state was subjected to a fierce assault by its opponents and enemies, who tried to obscure all its virtues and positive aspects while expanding on its negatives and fabricating lies against it, attributing to it things that were not true of it. He traces this in part to the fact that history was written under the rule of their political rivals, the Abbasids.

Secondly, this writing was in Shiite hands that, in his view, lacked fairness and justice and did not speak with knowledge or understanding. Dr. Hamdi Shaheen discussed in his book "The Slandered Umayyad State" the reasons behind the falsification of Umayyad history and the methods historians used in writing it.

Many researchers today agree on the difficulty of studying the Umayyad state due to the loss of its contemporary sources before the ninth and tenth centuries, leaving us almost entirely dependent on accounts written in Abbasid Iraq a century after the fall of Damascus. Because of this temporal gap and the sometimes biased nature of the sources, the Umayyads—as the first ruling dynasty—remain burdened by one of history's heaviest controversies.