CHAPTER EIGHT

LITERARY TEXTS AS DEMOGRAPHIC INDICATORS

I. *Traditions and Other Texts Quoted Verbatim*

When, allegedly, the 'Abbāsid Muḥammad ibn 'Alī gave his directives to his missionaries, he instructed them to avoid the other *amṣār* and imperial centers and to concentrate on Khurāsān. In no uncertain demographic terms, he expounded his strategic reasons:

> But go for Khurāsān. For, it is there that the great multitudes and manifest tenacity abound; where there are wholesome breasts and empty hearts, [hearts] not portioned out to [diverse] inclinations, not distributed among [different] creeds, not occupied by any sectarian beliefs, nor corrupted by inequity. They don't have today the ardour of the Arabs, nor do they harbour anything like the partisanship which bonds followers to their masters, or like the alliances of the tribes and the tribal solidarity (*'aṣabiyyah*) of the clans. They have always been trampled upon, humiliated and oppressed; and they have always suppressed their anger and held out hope for change. Furthermore, they are soldiers with enormous bodies and 'hulks', shoulders, withers, heads, beards, moustaches and voices, and velarized vernaculars which emerge from strange bellies.[1]

In a similar tradition, Muḥammad ibn 'Alī 'prophesied':

> God forbade but that our partisans should be the people of Khurāsān (*ahl Khurāsān*); we shall never triumph except through them, and they shall never triumph except through us. It shall come to pass that, from Khurāsān, seventy thousand [wielders of] unsheathed swords will emerge, their hearts [as solid] as iron, their names [mere] agnomen (*al-Kunā*), and their pedigrees [mere] village affiliations; they let their hairs grow as long as those of the *ghouls*.[2]

Improbable as it is, Sharon reads the above as a description of Arabs. Actually, these texts are either completely useless, or, if anything is to be inferred from them, it may well be that they refer to tigers or

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[1] *Akhbār*, pp. 206-7; almost identical text in Ibn Qutayabah, *'Uyūn al-Akhbār*, I: pp. 204-5; partial or with variations in: Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf III*: p. 81; Maqdisī, IV: p. 59; Yāqūt, II: p. 352; Jāḥiẓ, *Manāqib*, I: pp.16, 18; Ibn al-Faqīh, p.315; Muqaddasī, pp.293-4; cf. Sharon, *Black Banners*, pp. 51-2, n. 3.

[2] Yāqūt, II: p. 353; cf. *Akhbār*, pp. 305-6; Ibn al-Faqīh, p. 315; cf. Sharon, *Black Banners*, p. 67 and n. 50.

crocodiles—but definitely not to Arabs, and most certainly not to the intensely tribalized Arabs of Khurāsān.[3] Van Vloten recognized the description for what it was meant—a characterization of the Aryan natives of the region.[4] So did al-Jāḥiẓ and al-Muqaddasī.[5]

The fact of the matter is that these two traditions betray two hallmarks of the ʿAbbāsid *riwāyah*. The first is, of course, that Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī had nothing to do with them. Like others, these traditions were cast in the form of prophecies and attributed to him, to glorify him, and to impose his presence on a theatre of events with which he had nothing to do. The second is that, as with some other similar fabrications, the later ʿAbbāsid propaganda machine, author of these traditions, sought, where sustainable, to smuggle their interpolations into the basically true texture of events. Especially in the specific case of the above two traditions, the real author/s were dealing with an ideal situation. When they authored their *Imām's* divinations, the sweeping movement had already occurred under the full glare of the contemporary world and its historians, and the true identity of the Revolutionaries, 'the black devils' in Isidori Hispalensis' expression,[6] was no longer a secret; it could not be easily tampered with. Nor did they need to tamper with it. The fact that the overwhelming majority of the Khurāsāniyyah were actually native Khurāsānites did not pose any problem to the ʿAbbāsid interpolators. On the contrary, one may even be tempted to date these, and some of the similarly pro-Persian or anti-Arab traditions,[7] to the civil war, when the Persianized propaganda machine of al-Ma'mūn could use such traditions to fuel the Persian enmity toward the mainly Arab supporters of al-Amīn.

Thus, the only chore with which the interpolators were left was to incorporate Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī into a veracious situation. Simple! Make him prophesy the whole situation, complete with the unmistakably accurate and detailed depiction of the ethnic properties

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[3] Sharon, *Black Banners*, pp. 52-4. For a detailed discussion of Sharon's contention, see Agha, 'Agents,' pp. 354-8.

[4] Vloten, p. 44.

[5] Jāḥiẓ made it clear who Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī is supposed to have meant by his description. The 'spokesman' for the Khurāsānite Persians in al-Jāḥiẓ's text said: 'And it is us who ... Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī mentioned when he wanted to despatch the *duʿāt* ... and we are people endowed with enormous bodies and hulks, hair, withers and huge shoulders.' *Manāqib*, pp. 16, 18. Muqaddasī explicitly construes the text as a depiction of the natives of Khurāsān (p. 293).

[6] Wellhausen, p. 533.

[7] Such as the allegation that Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī, or his son Ibrāhīm, ordered Abū Muslim to kill every Arab who had attained a five spans-of-the-hand height. Ṭabarī, II: pp. 1937, 1974; *Akhbār*, p. 392; Azdī, pp. 65, 107; Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, IV: pp. 476, 479; Dhahabī, *Siyar*, VI: p. 59; Ibn al-Athīr, IV: pp. 295, 304.

and the socio-economic situation and the non-sectarian partisanships of his 'promised' partisans. It would tally with the witnessed facts of the era which had unfolded some decades earlier—glory to the demi-prophet! It would also secure him a presence on the theatre of events. Naive as this may sound, it was in keeping with the general character of the ʿAbbāsid *riwāyah*. And so it came to pass.

The preceding are not the only direct textual testimony to the non-Arab character of the Revolution, and of the Organization which prepared for and spearheaded it. Scores of texts, of prime or lesser value, are strewn all over the Arabic sources, all of which attest to the overwhelming non-Arab, and precisely Persian character of the movement. We shall consider a few more, starting the less decisive.

Al-Jāḥiẓ insightfully characterized the realms of the two Arab dynasties: "... the descendants of al-ʿAbbās ... their realm is Khurāsānite Iranian, and the realm of Banū Marwān was bedouin Arab (*walad al-ʿAbbās ... dawlatuhum ʿAjamiyyah Khurāsāniyyah, wa dawlat Banī Marwān ʿArabiyyah Aʿrābiyyah*)."[8] Commenting on the final outcome of the struggle, a disappointed Dhahabī says: "we rejoiced that [the reins of power] passed to their, [the Prophet's family], hands ... nay, it was a tyrant Khurāsānian Persian regime that which arrived, *bal atat dawlah Aʿjamiyyah Khurāsāniyyah jabbārah*."[9]

Of course, advancing in support of our argument these and similar texts, which revolve around characterizing the emerging regime rather than the movement which brought it into existence, is open to this very criticism: No one contests the eventual Persian influence in the ʿAbbāsid realm, the controversy is around the ethnic character of the forces which installed it. True. But this gives rise to the question: how was it possible for the influential Persian elements to extend their influence beyond the cultural and political spheres into the military establishment, which is the last bastion an 'existing' power, ethnic or otherwise, would peaceably surrender? How did they come to control the military, and comprise its backbone, if they were not the undisputed victors? If the Arabs made up the main bulk of the victorious forces, how come they were so soon discarded from its ranks, as phrased by Suyūṭī: "Historians said: in the realm of Banū al-ʿAbbās ... the name of the Arabs was dropped from the *dīwān*."[10] Does it make sense to assume that the ʿAbbāsid realm emerged as a result of a struggle between Arabs and Arabs, in which Arabs defeated Arabs, then both Arabs, the victor and

[8] Jāḥiẓ, *Bayān*, III: p. 366.
[9] Dhahabī, *Siyar*, VI: p. 58.
[10] Suyūṭī, p. 258.

the vanquished, lost all military clout? How could the partisans of the *da'wah*, so soon and without a fight, lose the *dawlah*? Of course, one may say, this is not a decisive argument.

In his alleged directive to Abū 'Ikrimah, Muḥammad ibn 'Alī reportedly said: "... and recruit abundantly from amongst the Iranians, for they are the constituents of our cause, and by them God shall support it (*wa istakthir min al-A'ājim fa-innahum ahl da'watinā wa bi-him yu'ayyiduhā Allāh*)." Similarly, Abū Muslim reportedly admitted that the *Imām* had instructed him to: "gather the Iranians around me and to favor them (*wa [-an] ajma'a ilayya al-'Ajam wa akhtaṣṣahum*)." Hence, comments the pro-'Abbāsid anonymous compiler, "the Iranians, and many from the Yaman and the Rabī'ah, flocked to the *da'wah*, comprising true believers or avengers who hoped to achieve revenge."[11] Thus, the protagonists of the Revolution, participants and reporters alike, provide ammunition to the thrust of the present argument.

The antagonists also provide similar supporting evidence. Utterances in this class of sample direct texts are attributed to Naṣr ibn Sayyār or someone in his entourage.[12] According to *Akhbār*, when 'Īsā ibn A'yan, a *naqīb* and the spokesman for a Revolutionary delegation, invoked the *sunnah* of the Prophet, Salm ibn Aḥwaz, Naṣr's chief of police, answered him to his face: "As for what you said of the *sunnah* of the Prophet, what relation do you have with it? We are more entitled to him than you are. We are the Arabs and the sons of Arabs, and you are coarse infidels (*'ulūj*) and worshippers of cats."[13] The insulting tone and intention are obvious. But, even if we were to concede that the last phrase of Salm's retortion is merely a misrepresentation of the enemy's beliefs and a tool of the propaganda war, would lying about his ethnic identity serve the purpose, especially when the statement is addressed to an enemy delegation rather than the public, for the sympathies of which a propaganda war was waged?

Naṣr himself pursued the same themes with the religious leaders of public opinion. Referring to a worship practice, which could well have been a residue from the Manichean background of some of the converts, he said: "These wearers of black (*Musawwidah*), they preach a creed other than ours, they have declared a religious norm other than ours, they are not from the people of our *Qiblah*, they worship cats and they

[11] *Akhbār*, pp. 204, 285; cf. Ṭabarī, II: p. 1937.

[12] Despite their inherent power, these texts are voluntarily relegated to this lower class of testimony, simply because Naṣr himself provides the ultimate textual piece, which will be analyzed below.

[13] *Akhbār*, p. 287.

worship heads."[14] We need not contend the possible charge that this statement is a misrepresentation. One certainly can misrepresent the beliefs of ones adversaries. Beliefs are naturally invisible and are susceptible to false charges. The social and ethnic properties of an adversary are visible. They cannot be as easily misrepresented. Honorable people may be slandered; in the swearing match, respectable people may be turned into the refuse of society; but Arabs or Iranians could not be 'accused' of being other than what they were. Said Naṣr: "... they are gentiles, incognitos, slaves, and the refuse of the Arabs and the *mawālī* (*'ulūj wa aghtām wa 'abīd wa suqqāṭ al-'Arab wa al-mawālī*)."[15]

If Naṣr did try to sell even his 'distortion' of such visible demographic features to contemporaneous eye witnesses, who coexisted with the 'victims' of the 'distortion' in the same geographical space, it is inconceivable that he would have tried the same with one of the major players, who must have been amply informed of the demographics of the theatre. In a despatch to 'Alī ibn al-Kirmānī, which *Akhbār* quotes verbatim, Naṣr invoked the common Arab solidarity to appeal to Ibn al-Kirmānī's ethnic sentiment, in a bid to rally him against the common ethnic enemy; said Naṣr:

> The war between us has been [fuelled by tribal] chauvinism; during that, we had [a tendency] to spare one another, in view of the harmony of the Arabs. Now sprang in our midst those whose intention is to eliminate us all. You have learnt of what these people inflicted on Nasā, Ṭālaqān, Marw al-Rūdh, Āmul and Zamm; and of how little they spare the inviolability of the Arabs.[16]

What had been inflicted on Nasā, Ṭālaqān ... etc., or actually on the Arab communities and garrisons in these locations, were 'atrocities' even Abū Muslim did not bother to deny.[17]

The demographic aspects of Naṣr and his party's depiction of the Revolutionaries, and their charges against them, including the recruitment of slaves, were never challenged by Abū Muslim and his party. When Abū Muslim staged his propagandist extravaganza in the Mākhuwān trench, it was intensively and specifically pointed to counter Naṣr's charges regarding the beliefs of the Revolutionaries. No effort whatsoever was made to address Naṣr's ethnic portrayals.[18] Of course,

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[14] Ibid., p. 290, cf. editor's note no.1.

[15] Ibid. In corroboration of Naṣr's charge regarding the slaves, see Abū Muslim's organized efforts to recruit them, Ibid., pp. 280-1.

[16] Ibid., p. 289.

[17] Ibid., p. 284. On the indications of widespread atrocities against the Arabs across Khurāsān and Transoxania, see Agha, 'Abū Muslim,' p. 344, n. 62 and 63.

[18] Ibid., pp. 290-2; also 282.

there was no point, and, more importantly, no interest, in trying to deny the obvious. On the contrary, it was no accusation to tell non-Arabs that they were just that—non-Arabs. Therefore, it never called for a denial.

A pivotal phrase in some of these texts is the Arabic construct '*ahl Khurāsān*', literally meaning 'the people of Khurāsān'. Admittedly, this phrase can be ambiguous. '*Ahl*' in Arabic does not necessarily always mean the native population; it can also mean the people who populate the place, regardless of their geographic or ethic origins. Indeed, the phrase, as Sharon contends, frequently appears in the sources indicating the Arab military garrisons manning the *amṣār*. But it is also frequently used to indicate the natives of the region. Actually, it always rests within the context to decide which is meant. Sharon insists on reading the term exclusively as a reference to the Arabs; he says: "The term '*Ahl Khurāsān*' indicated only the *Arab tribesmen* of the province and not its inhabitants in general. Similarly the terms '*Ahl al-shām*' and '*Ahl al-ʿIrāq*'."[19] He could not have been more wrong. Here is a clear example of contextual 'shades'. Balādhurī reports that, when Dāwūd ibn ʿAlī, al-Saffāḥ's uncle, took the podium on the day al-Saffāḥ was proclaimed, "he mentioned the Arabs and noted their slowness [in responding to the *daʿwah*], and he praised *ahl Khurāsān*." Dāwūd also said, verbatim: "The Arabs have unanimously agreed to deny our rights and to support the oppressor Umayyads; until God provided for us, with this army of *ahl Khurāsān*, who answered our call and mobilized to support us."[20] How can one construe synonymity in such a razor sharp context of antonyms so closely juxtaposed!

There can be no doubt that, at least in as far as the integrity of our source material is respected, the phrase '*ahl Khurāsān*' (and, by extension, Khurāsāniyyah), in the Revolutionary context, did not betoken the Arabs of Khurāsān. Nowhere is this better attested than in Qaḥṭaba's speech to his troops, as he tried to lift up their morale when they confronted the better equipped Umayyad army of Nubātah ibn Ḥanẓalah in Jurjān. While it is very important to note the moralist cosmopolitan egalitarianism of an idealist Arab Muslim, which abundantly gushes forth from this piece uniquely attributed to an Arab, it is even more vital—for our present purpose—to note the neat unambiguous demographics pinpointed through its language. The term '*ahl Khurāsān*', which Qaḥṭabah used to address his troops, unequivocally means the Iranian non-Arab natives of the land. And Qaḥṭabah's daring reference to the original ownership of the land forcefully tables a

[19] Sharon, *Black Banners*, p. 67, n. 51.
[20] Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf III*, pp. 140, 141.

selectively forgotten issue. In the heat of scholarly 'revisionist' tendencies, which reject the ascription of 'nationalistic' self-definition to medieval communities, the territorial dimension was all but forgotten. If the veracity of this piece could be established beyond any doubt, there should be no need for anything further to establish the ethnic identity of the effective majority of the Revolutionaries. This not being the case, the literal implications of the language, at least earlier than Sharon's specimen, must not be neglected. Said Qaḥṭabah:

> O people of Khurāsān, (*yā ahla Khurāsān*), these lands belonged to your forefathers. They used to be given victory over their enemies in view of their fairness and good conduct, until they changed [that] and oppressed [people]. Then God, glorified may He be, brought down His wrath upon them, so He tore out their dominion and set on them the nation which was the most despicable to them on earth; they overpowered them over their own land, took their women, and enslaved their children. All through that, they [the new nation = the Arabs] reigned justly, fulfilled pledges and supported the oppressed. Then they changed [that] and did injustice in [their] rule, and intimidated the pious of the descendants of the Prophet of God. So God set you on them, to take revenge from them through you, that their punishment be [especially] harsher since you are seeking revenge from them.[21]

The tune of the times, and the indicativeness of specific events—how they bear on the present demographic issue—may have already been incidentally discussed, sporadically, and in a topically localized manner. However, certain powerful utterances within the contexts of such events may be worth specific attention. Such utterances are rather objective—in the sense that, even when attributed to a member of one or the other of the warring factions, they are not derisive, but instruments of strategic and tactical analysis and evaluation of the demographic situation, designed for the benefit of that faction. They concur on a sharp polarization in the definition and demarcation of the antagonists: The Arabs versus the *Musawwidah*; and examples are not in short supply.[22]

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[21] Ṭabarī, II: pp. 2004-5. Cf. Sharon, *Revolt*, pp. 187-8, where he futilely argues against the veracity of ascribing the piece to Qaḥṭabah.

[22] (a) 'Aqīl ibn Ma'qil al-Laythī, a relative of Naṣr's and a prominent member of his staff, advised him to refrain from attacking the *Musawwidah* in their sanctuary amongst the Khuzā'ah. His rationale clearly distinguishes between the *Musawwidah* on the one hand and the Yaman and Rabī'ah on the other. Said 'Aqīl: 'I am afraid that that [i.e., violating the Yaman's tribal sanctity], might push them to enter into what the *qawm* [the Revolutionaries] have entered into and to don black as they have ... How worthless the power of these [*Musawwidah*] would be if the Rabī'ah and the Yaman would refrain from supporting them!' (*Akhbār*, p. 275). Their power would be 'worthless', that is, in Marw.

(b) Abū Muslim maneuvered to spoil the truce which the warring Arab tribes had managed to forge; and, when the 'accord between the Arabs collapsed,' Abū Muslim managed to position himself as an arbitrator between Muḍar on the one hand, and

II. *The Crucial Literary Specimen*

We shall now turn to a different type of texts. Some prime-grade literary material bear direct, contemporaneous, and specific witness to the real ethnic compositions of the adversaries. This material belongs to the preserved part of the body of correspondence exchanged between Naṣr ibn Sayyār, in his own pen, and Marwān II, in his secretary's pen; or addressed by Naṣr to the governor of Iraq, Yazīd ibn ʿUmar ibn Hubayrah, or to his own compatriot Khurāsānite Arab tribesmen. This body comprises mostly poetry and artistic prose.

II.1. *ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd ibn Yaḥyā's Letters*

Marwān II's end of the correspondence was written, on his behalf, by his secretary, the celebrated stylist ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd ibn Yaḥyā al-Kātib. As such, it acquires the rare quality of belonging to the archetypes of a genus of *belles-lettres*; and, at the same time, it comes close to earning the documentary value of archival materials which, unfortunately, do not exist from the period. As far as is known to this writer, since *Akhbār al-Dawlah al-ʿAbbāsiyyah* was discovered and then published, no exciting new material that so directly bears on the subject controversy has been uncovered. That is, until 1988, when Iḥsān ʿAbbās published his work on ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd.

Of specific relevance to the present issue are two of ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd's epistles, and some of ʿAbbās' comments. Epistle no.38 in ʿAbbās' sequence[23] comprises only the previously known remaining last part of

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Rabīʿah and Yaman on the other. As a result, he succeeded in fanning the flames of discord even further, and secured for himself a breathing space, so 'he ordered the Shīʿah to build houses and prepare for the winter, since God had spared them the concord of the Arabs, and caused them [the Arabs] to slip, through [Abū Muslim's] offices, into discord.' (Abū al-Khaṭṭāb, in Ṭabarī, II: pp. 1985-6)

(c) Abū al-Maylāʾ, Yaḥyā ibn Nuʿaym, a thoroughly tribal politician and a notable of Rabīʿah, was sharply aware of the ethnic dimension of the Revolution. Urging his kinsmen and his Yamanite allies to conclude a truce with Naṣr, he drew in sharp lines the true portrait of the demographic divides; he warned his people: 'Choose: either you perish before Muḍar, or Muḍar before you ... This man, [Abū Muslim], has appeared just a month ago, and [already] his army has grown as big as yours.' (Madāʾinī, in Ṭabarī, II: p. 1966). And when these and similar efforts met with temporary success, and later collapsed, historians described the demographically shifting alliances in no less ethnically slanted language. Abū al-Khaṭṭāb: 'Then the tribesmen from Muḍar, Rabīʿah and Qaḥṭān agreed to stop fighting and to join forces to fight Abū Muslim,' (in Ṭabarī, II: p. 1969). Ṭabarī himself: 'They unanimously agreed, the Muḍarites, Yamanites and Rabaʿites, along with those Iranians, *al-Aʿājim*, with them, to fight the *Musawwidah*' (Ṭabarī, II: p. 1998). Madāʾinī: '... Naṣr saw what was brought on him [at the hands of] the Yamanites, the Rabaʿites and the Iranians, *al-ʿAjam*,' (in Ṭabarī, II: p. 1993-4).

[23] ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, p. 289.

an epistle, the remainder of which is lost. It clearly addresses the Arab Umayyad constituency, and the Arabs at large, urging them to withstand the onslaught of the Iranians, '*al-fi'ah al-A'jamiyyah*.' Aside from the emotionally charged accusations painting the Revolutionaries as religious renegades, the objective elements in this epistle are worth noting: (1) the evolution of the news about the Revolution, from hearsay to manifest action, (2) the emergence of the Revolutionaries from a clandestine phase into the open, and from discord to concord, (3) their march west, and (4) their ethnic identity. This is almost faithful broad outline of the history of the Organization as depicted in the first five chapters of this book: utmost secrecy, through the iron curtains of which only rumors trickled to Marwān II's ears; the emergence of the Organization into the open after Abū Muslim won the internal struggle with Sulaymān (concord after discord); the overwhelming sweep by the masses of the Iranian territory (proliferation after constraint); Qaḥṭabah's march west from *dār al-'Ajam* to Arab territory; and a positive identification of the ethnic character of the Revolutionaries (*al-fi'ah al-A'jamiyyah*).The following is a translation of this extant passage:

> Now then, it had been relayed to you [first] as hearsay, then [you witnessed it as] a scandalous act—the concord of these renegades after their discord, the clear manifestation of their secret after ambiguity, and the proliferation of their deception and delusion in the land after it had been constrained. Here they are, they left Khurāsān, the prime of the world and the abode of the Iranians (*dār al-'Ajam*) behind them, and came after your territory, to fight you over it, and to budge you away from it by the two armies of falsification and of the sword. For the fear of God you must defend your religion; and for fear of shame you must beware that your worldly possessions be wrested from you. Uphold your allegiance to those who relied on you, and do not enable the hand of the Iranian race to hold the reins of the Arab realm (*wa-lā tumkinū nāṣiyat al-dawlah al-'Arabiyyah min yad al-fi'ah al-A'jamiyyah*). Stand firm until this deluge clears away and this intoxication comes to sobriety. For, the flood shall dry up, and the 'sign of the night' shall be 'blotted out'.[24]

More important is epistle no.8 in the sequence.[25] It is one of the fourteen hitherto unpublished and unknown. As such it is precious new material of great corroborative value. Interestingly, although—or, more accurately, because—it adds nothing new to the voluminous information we already have, its most precious addition is itself—its mere existence. It cements the pre-revisionist conventional wisdom. This epistle is a lengthy letter written, on behalf of Marwān II, to Naṣr ibn

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., pp. 198-201.

Sayyār on the subject of the Revolution, and is dated to the year 128/745-746. Although the letter is full of defamatory language, of the type that both parties could, and, with colorfully different slantings, did use against one another, it is also rife with objective demographic indicators and historical references. Even some specific articulations of the defamatory language are laden with such demographic pointers. The following is a translation of some relevant passages:

> The cropping up of this sprout (*al-nābitah*) in the land of Khurāsān [has been an instrument with which] God intended to humiliate those ungrateful for His grace ... [It sprouted at the hands of] an evil man to whom evil men rallied. When he saw the Arabs preoccupied with themselves, he took the opportunity of their being engrossed in their hostilities towards each other, and that they neglected to address the most pressing of their concerns. When he grew stronger and more resourceful ... and his [tentacles] spread in evil, he slandered the Book (the Qur'ān) by falsehood, and the Prophet by propagandizing for his descendants, [a ploy] with which to entice the feeble-minded of evil men, while branding, [by such propaganda], branding the pious predecessors with injustice ... He manumits slaves, recruits the wicked, honors the languid and the obscure, and twists the rule of the Religion, disparaging it [in the process] ... He proceeds gently and approaches things with a friendly attitude, masking what he [really] wants to proclaim, until such a time as he is empowered to achieve [his true objective, i.e.,] obliterating the traces of the Religion...
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> Do not, [you Naṣr and your men], abandon resoluteness [simply] because they have gained the upper hand over you, or because of their numerousness and your fewness; for it is because you had started the confrontation with negligence that they grew numerous and prospered. Your meekness is indeed more potent than the might of their multitude, for God's hand is [with] rightness, and rightness is worthier of you and you are closer to it, and God is more wrathful with them; so assail them [aided] by the intensity of God's wrath, seeking to glorify what they belittled. Had it not been for their allurement of the people, and their [attempts] to appease and reassure them about him, [i.e., the never-named Abū Muslim], and for the people's hope in him, [i.e., their taking the bait], they, [i.e., the Revolutionaries], would have exhibited varieties of godlessness, gross slanders, grave selfishness, and pursuit of atrocities, what with the living would have wished to have been dead. Therefore, resort to perseverance, earning [the capacity for] it by your good faith. Remember what their recent experience comprises: the worship of fire and idols ...
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> They feigned Islam while ignorant of it; and beseeched you in its name while themselves abandoning it; and they fought you over it, while they fall short of its demands. With your knowledge of it you are worthier of defending it ... You and your fathers are the consenters to its having been revealed, and the fighters over its interpretation. They are the renouncers

> of its totality; and the twisters of [the meanings of the specifics of] what they accepted [out of that totality].[26]

Naturally, the letter represents the official Umayyad line. But the real issue is whether this fact discredits it, and, if so, to what extent. ʿAbbās puts it well when he says that the letter

> ... uncovers many aspects which historical research may support or may differ with ... It represents an 'official' point of view, which, by itself, is not a drawback. What matters is: to what extent does it represent the historical reality, and to what extent may some of the information contained in it be deemed as 'propaganda'?[27]

He reviews the letter in detail and provides an illuminating commentary.[28] To the possible charge: "it may be said that this letter actually aimed at distorting reality because it resorted to evoking Arab racism in the name of religion," his answer is: "but how would it have been possible for this letter to have been read to the pro-Umayyad Arabs of Khurāsān, and for them to believe it, if the Revolutionaries were Arabs like themselves?"[29] ʿAbbās places the letter firmly within the context of the modern scholarly controversy over the ethnic identity of the Revolutionaries. He refutes some of the arguments of the post-Wellhausen revisionists,[30] and accords the letter the prominent position, in the context, which it deserves. Says he:

> Some of the contents of this epistle bring historical research back to a theory which van Vloten had presented, and which Wellhausen subsequently elaborated—namely, that those who supported the ʿAbbāsid *Daʿwah* were the *mawālī* class, driven by Persian (Iranian) nationalist feelings ... This epistle restores to van Vloten's and Wellhausen's theory its weight and supports it when it states that those who followed Abū Muslim were 'recent worshippers of fire and idols,' that is, they were of Persian stock.[31]

But then ʿAbbās attaches a qualifier to the extent to which this letter supports the classical theory. He says:

> However, that theory, [i.e., Wellhausen's], requires some modification in the light of this letter. For, these Persians, who supported Abū Muslim, did not revolt motivated by nationalist Iranian feelings. They rather

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[26] Ibid.
[27] ʿAbbās, p. 89.
[28] Ibid., pp. 87-92.
[29] Ibid., p. 91. We shall echo this same defense in establishing the basic credibility of Naṣr ibn Sayyar's *bāʾiyyah* poem, infra.
[30] Ibid., pp. 91-2.
[31] Ibid., pp. 90, 91.

> 'proclaimed[32] Islam while ignorant of it; and beseeched you in its name while themselves abandoning it; and they fought you over it, while they fall short of its demands;' that is, Islam itself was their slogan.[33]

'Abbās is clearly focusing on the question of motivation, which is, in part, and at least in this context, an issue of the inner human soul—an issue of intention arising from belief. He accepts van Vloten's and Wellhausen's identification of the ethnic identity of the Revolutionaries, and that 'Abd al-Ḥamīd's letter supports it. But to the question of why these Iranians revolted, 'Abbās construes that the letter gives an answer different from theirs. He emphatically negates the nationalist motivation, but stops short of affirming the religious one, by relegating it to having been a slogan (*shi'ār*). It is not clear, however, why 'Abbās interprets 'Abd al-Ḥamīd's text as negating a basically nationalist motivation when the text strikes the reader as being explicitly clear on this point.[34]

Actually, 'Abd al-Ḥamīd did not accuse Abū Muslim and his followers of innocent ignorance of Islam. He accused them of abusing its slogans as a camouflage, "to entice people" and "until such a time as he is empowered" to uncover his true intentions and "obliterate the traces of the Religion ... They are the renouncers of its totality, and the twisters" of the bits and pieces of it which they accepted. Frye argues for the authenticity of Abū Muslim's Islamic faith: "His Umayyad enemies had every opportunity to call him a rebel against Islam, or to denounce him as a heretic, but such is not the case."[35] Of course, when Frye wrote this, in 1947, 'Abd al-Ḥamīd's letter was not uncovered yet. Nor was *Akhbār al-Dawlah al-'Abbāsiyyah*, where Salm ibn Aḥwaz is quoted referring to Abū Muslim as a Mazdakite.[36] But Naṣr ibn Sayyār's resounding accusations were available to Frye.

It is our position, however, that attempting to determine the true inner beliefs of individuals—let alone collectivities—and then to advance such determinations as decisive historiographical tools of investigation is superfluous, redundant, and utterly useless. This is not to say that true beliefs are not powerful motivators, or that they are not intensely interesting, and that, if demonstrable, they are not

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[32] Note the intentional discrepancy between my two differing translations of the verb *'idda'aw*. I rendered it 'feigned' in my lengthy quote above, because this is what I believe 'Abd al-Ḥamīd intended. Here, where 'Abbās uses the quote as a direct part of his argument, the obvious thrust of this argument mandates 'proclaimed' or, at most, 'claimed'.

[33] 'Abbās, p. 91.

[34] Clearly so, 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, p. 200; also in letter no.38, p. 289.

[35] Frye, p. 30.

[36] *Akhbār*, p. 287.

illuminating, and even indicative. It is simply that we hold that such beliefs are not ascertainable, therefore they cannot be employed as prime tools of investigation. Our primary concern here is: who said what about whom; what demographic indicators can be elucidated from such statements; and, to what extent can we extract objective information from clearly defamatory language?

Despite the fact that ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd expressly targeted the Iranians (*al-fiʾah al-Aʿjamiyyah*) with his accusations, the nature of the accusations, and the highly charged defamatory language suggest that he was zeroing in on a specific cross-section of the Revolutionary constituency—a cross-section susceptible, in the eyes of his contemporary audience, to such accusations, regardless of whether they were true or false.

Who were the constituents of this cross-section? The Umayyads and their party could not have flaunted these accusations in the face of any Arab. It would have been idiotically meaningless, and antagonizing to those whom they tried to attract, to accuse Qaḥṭabah, for instance,[37] of having been a "recent worshipper of fire and idols." They could hardly have done it even to the old *mawālī*, deep-rooted in Islam and well-entrenched in the institution of *walāʾ*, to which ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd himself most probably belonged.[38] At least Naṣr exempted this class of Muslim Iranians from similar accusations.[39] This leaves the rest of the conquered population as the potential pool from which this cross-section was singled out. The obvious distinguishing mark which separated this cross-section from the vast pool to which it belonged was its 'recent' conversion to Islam.

Umayyad proponents like ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd rested their characterization of their adversaries on three interconnected, situationally objective demographic qualities, all of which arise from the conversion phenomenon: (1) ethnically, the rebels were Iranians; (2) religiously, they were recent converts to Islam; (3) quantitatively, they were numerous—enormously so, that they substantially outnumbered the finite and relatively small community of both Arabs and established *mawālī* whose Islam had been old. To these descriptive qualities,

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[37] Or, for that matter, even an incognito Arab such as, say, a certain Yūsuf ibn ʿAqīl ibn Ḥassān ibn ... ibn ... ... of Ṭayyiʾ (no.387).

[38] See ʿAbbās, pp. 25-6.

[39] People such as, say, the house of Aʿyan, whose *walāʾ* to the Prophet's companion, Buraydah ibn al-Ḥuṣayb, must have been around seven to eight decades old belong to this class. Although, in a tense face-to-face confrontation with the senior amongst the Aʿyans, ʿĪsā (no.210), Naṣr's men were undiplomatically 'religiously' and racially hostile (*Akhbār*, p. 287), this could hardly have been the public Umayyad stance. In the same confrontation, Naṣr was displeased with his men's stance. His poetry, as shall shortly be demonstrated, almost equates the 'genuine *mawālī*' with tha Arabs in his context.

Umayyad proponents added a fourth: the inflammatory judgemental charge that the conversion of these recent converts was not sincere, and that their brand of Islam was twisted.

That the converts were Iranians cannot be a point of contention,[40] regardless of how numerous they were, or of the time of their conversion. If there is any defamation, it can only be in the unascertainable judgemental charge of insincerity, and in the language used to make it. But there is a situational demographic dimension to the question; and it cannot be ignored. This is best evoked by Madelung's remark: "Islam required from its early Persian converts an almost total break with their own religious traditions."[41] Is this humanly possible, and did the converts actually oblige? But, before attending to this contentious question, we shall visit one more text.

II.2 *Naṣr ibn Sayyār's Bā'iyyah Poem*

The paramount literary piece dating back to the period is not a new discovery. It had always been available to modern scholars. Naṣr ibn Sayyār's *bā'iyyah* poem unquestionably depicts, or, more objectively put, formulates Naṣr's depiction of Abū Muslim's following. If it is accepted as a descriptively objective demographic portrait, as it should, there would be no doubt about the Iranian identity of the Revolution. Nallino recognized the unique historical value of Naṣr's extant poetry.[42] But other modern scholars did not give the *bā'iyyah* poem its full historical due.[43]

That said, however, the same hypothetical charges that may be levelled against 'Abd al-Ḥamīd's objectivity may also be used to discredit Naṣr's. And the same defense also may be used to support the credibility of Naṣr's poem. More specifically, and moreover, three types of evidence support one another, presenting Naṣr's *bā'iyyah* as the single most important key to the whole issue of the demographic composition of the Revolutionary constituency. In the order they will be discussed, not in the order of their degree of validity or importance, these are: (1) evidence pertaining to Naṣr's character and to precedents of his poetic

[40] There were no more Arab candidates for conversion, not in Khurāsān anyway.

[41] Madelung, 'Mazdakism,' p. 1.

[42] Nallino, pp. 260-2.

[43] Wellhausen, Daniel, Omar, and Sharon mention the poem. Wellhausen redeems it with a qualifier, but he does not emphasize its most important distinction between two types of Iranians (pp. 534-6). Daniel construes the distinction as depicting 'the rebels as *mawālī* of no account' (*Khurasan*, p. 70 n. 152). Omar and Sharon treat the poem as a mix of propaganda and partial truth in its reference to the tribal strife, but both also fail to detect the vital demographic distinction between two types of Iranians (*'Abbāsid Caliphate*, pp. 98-9 and n. 253; *Revolt*, p. 63 ff.).

addresses to previous adversaries; (2) circumstantial and internal evidence that pertain to the poem itself; and, (3) numerical objective data, garnered from the sources, quite aside from the *bā'iyyah*'s influence, but gauged and analyzed under its potent 'tutelage'.

Naṣr ibn Sayyār was a veteran of tribal in-fighting, and a veteran imperial frontier warrior. In both capacities he paradoxically demonstrated a fire-brand reckless rashness, and even before he became the ultimate statesman in Khurāsān, a measure of statesmanship and prudence. When he did become governor of the province, or probably after he had spent sometime squaring scores with old tribal adversaries, he was almost completely transformed—in his golden years—into a tribal healer on the internal Arab front, a reformer on the inter-racial internal Islamic front, and a prudent pacifist on the frontiers. A character much more humanly credible than scores of the one-dimensional characters met across the sources, Naṣr ibn Sayyār is worthy of an independent study yet to be attempted. It may be said that he had to feign an accommodating stance after he, his party, and the entire Establishment had been squeezed on all fronts. It may be advanced, however, albeit cautiously, that this fighter character belies this rationale and tends to support a vision of a matured Naṣr. Even in his triumphant days, he had exhibited far-sightedness, tolerance and statesmanship.[44]

But of course, as a poet, Naṣr did use poetry for propaganda purposes. Some of his poetry, however, smacks of a distinct flavor peculiar to a unique genre known in the literary heritage of the Arabs as *al-Munṣifāt* (the equitable poems/verses). Drenched in adversity, neither abandoning his cause nor attempting to appease his adversary, a poet of this mind set refrains from distorting his antagonists' image, and does not shy away from singing their praises. Moreover, such a poet serenely admits that both parties are equal and that they equally succumb to the same tragic state of affairs, as did Naṣr in these two unique verses of his:

> We, and this tribe of the Yaman, we both claim,
> when it is boasting time, equally venerable [notables].
> We owe them a lot of blood,
> and they owe us blood and old feud.[45]

This is not to say that Naṣr was not a master of adversity. In fact, the greater majority of the little that survived from his poetry is consumed in alerting the central government to the dangers of the brewing

[44] Consider his reforms, and his treaty with the Sughdians, Agha, 'Agents,' pp. 286-90.

[45] Naṣr ibn Sayyār, p. 27.

Revolution, or in slandering one adversary or another. In this poetry, some of the most important events of the time are recorded;[46] and there is no trace of falsification. True, it is full of boasting—but about 'credits' objectively due to him; and it is rife with scorn—but always against a clearly named and well defined adversary, whose identity Naṣr never tried to falsify.

The most pertinent precedent is probably Naṣr's versification against al-Ḥārith ibn Surayj and the Murji'ites. The poem[47] is clearly a propaganda ploy; but all through the scorn and the religious rallying and provocation, the demographic identities of the enemy coalition are clearly stated and in agreement with the historical records. He did not deny the presence of Arabs in the movement; on the contrary, he confirmed it by urging his audience to kill them:

> Kill those in our ranks who support them and who adhere to them,
> deem them infidels and condemn them.

The charge that they were "people who do not [perform] the prayers (*qawmin lā yuṣallūnā*)," although incorrectly generalized to all of them, was nevertheless true of the new converts who were the mainstay of the Murji'ite movement in Khurāsān.[48] Naṣr did not fabricate the alliance between the movement and polytheism, i.e., the non-Muslim Turgesh, which is attested in the profuse reports in the sources. Even his inflamed charge that the Murji'ites themselves were polytheists is an oblique charge of sorts. He does not conceal the fact that he was angrily branding them with guilt by association, rather than by initiation. He makes that syllogistically clear:

> Your *irjā'* hitched you together with polytheism in [one] bond,
> you are, therefore, polytheists as well as Murji'ites
> May God thrust deep in graves none but you,
> for, your religion is with polytheism associated.

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[46] The iner-tribal fighting at al-Barūqān in 106 /724-725 (Ṭabarī, II: pp. 1473-7; Naṣr ibn Sayyār, p. 36); The Battle of the Pass in 113/731-732 (Ṭabarī, II: p. 1533 ff., especially 1545, 1553-7; Naṣr ibn Sayyār, pp. 32-3); The Murji'ite revolt under the banners of al-Ḥārith ibn Surayj and in alliance with the non-Muslim Turgesh, starting in 116/734-735 (Ṭabarī, II: p. 1565 ff. and passim, especially 1574-6; Naṣr ibn Sayyār, pp. 47-9); The killing of al-Ḥārith ibn Surayj in 128/745-746 (Ṭabarī II: p. 1917 ff., especially 1935; Naṣr ibn Sayyār underscores the tribal repercussions of al-Ḥārith's movement, p. 39); Naṣr takes credit for the 129/746-747 killing of al-Kirmānī (Naṣr ibn Sayyār, p. 34; cf. Ṭabarī, II: pp. 1975-6); Most of the rest are impassioned warnings to the central government (Naṣr ibn Sayyār, pp. 30, 31, 38, 40-1).

[47] Naṣr ibn Sayyār, pp. 47-9; Ṭabarī, II: pp. 1574-6; see also my own translation of selections from this poem, Agha, 'Murji'a,' pp. 28-9.

[48] See e.g. Abū al-Ṣaydā"s episode with the new converts in 110/729-730, Ṭabarī, II: pp. 1507-10; Agha, 'Murji'a,' p. 19, and passim.

It is not so often that an adversary can be as objective in depicting the religious identity of his adversary.

The subject poem, the *bā'iyyah*, is much shorter than the above on crude language and scorn, and much longer on demographic situational objectivity. Following is the poem, and a translation thereof:

(1) *abligh Rabī'ata fī Marwin wa ikhwatahā*
an yaghḍabū qabla an lā yanfa'a l-ghaḍabu
(2) *wa-l-yanṣubū l-ḥarba inna l-qawma qad naṣabū*
ḥarban yuḥarraqu fī ḥāfātihā l-ḥaṭabu
(3) *mā bālukum tulqiḥūna l-ḥarba baynakumu*
ka'anna ahla l-ḥijā 'an fī'likum ghuyubu
(4) *wa tatrukūna 'aduwwan qad azallakumu*
mimman ta'ashshaba lā dīnun wa-lā ḥasabu
(5) *laysū ilā 'Arabin minnā fa-na'rifahum*
wa-lā ṣamīmi l-mawālī in humu nusibū
(6) *qawman yadīnuna dīnan mā sami'tu bihi*
'ani r-Rasūli wa-lā jā'at bihi l-Kutubu
(7) *fa-man yakun sā'ilī 'an aṣli dīnihumu*
fa-'inna dīnahumu an tuqtala l-'Arabu

(1) Let Rabī'ah in Marw, and its sister [tribes] know:
They should grow indignant before indignation turns futile;
(2) and let them wage war; for the [other] people have waged
a war, the edges of whose fire are with firewood incessantly fed.
(3) [Lo!] What is it with you, kindling war amongst yourselves
—as though men of prudence are of your doings unawares—
4) while you fail to engage an enemy closing in on you.
A motly mix they are: of religion and noble descent deprived:
(5) trancing their lineages—such as to enable us to recognize them—they are found to belong neither to any of our Arab [tribes], nor to the genuine *mawālī*;
(6) they adhere to a religion of which I never heard—
neither attributed to the Prophet, nor transmitted in the holy scriptures.
(7) Behold! Thou enquiring from me about the fundamentals of their religion:
Verily, their religion is that Arabs must be slain![49]

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[49] Naṣr ibn Sayyār, pp. 28-9. The poem, with variations in completeness, arrangement and some words and expressions, in: Dīnawarī, p. 360; Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf III*: pp. 132-3; *Akhbār*, pp. 313-4; Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, IV: pp. 478-9; Ibn A'tham, VIII: pp. 161-3; Ibn al-Athīr, IV: p. 304. Dūrī provides a comparative *takhrīj* of the poem in his editorial notes to *Akhbār*, and to Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf III*. The most, interesting variations, from a demographic and historiographical points of view, are *Akhbār*'s alteration of the second hemistich of verse 4, and its complete omission of verses 5 through 7, i.e., the demographically significant verses. At the same time, *Akhbār* ascribes to al-'Akkī (no.287) verses in direct retaliation to the ones it omits from Naṣr's poem (*Akhbār*, p. 314). Another interesting variation is the expression '*ṣarīḥa mawālin*'

What 'Abd al-Ḥamīd said in his elaborate prose Naṣr crystallizes more effectively and clearly in his compact verses. The demarcation between the two camps, and the fact that the protagonist (the Establishment's unwittingly divided constituency) were the Arab tribesmen (i.e., *'Rabī'ah wa ikhwatahā'* in Marw) are established in the first three verses. Then Naṣr elicits the demographic identity of the antagonists (the anonymous *al-qawm*) through a smooth, logically sequenced process of identification by elimination. In the second hemistich of verse 4, he establishes the three demographic criteria of identification: social recognizability and ethnic and religious identities; and he divests the Revolutionaries of any positive measure on all three counts: "*mimman ta'ashshaba lā dīnun wa-lā ḥasabu.*" Clearly, the three criteria are interconnected, with recognizability being the common positive trait of which the antagonist is deprived.

The recognizable pedigree, or ethnic lineage, belongs only to the Arabs and their social protégés, the established genuine *mawālī*. In the context of the Establishment, in whose name Naṣr was toiling and to whom the audience he hoped to lure belonged, this was true. Naṣr, in verse 5, finds the Revolutionaries to have been lacking both connections. They were not Arabs; therefore, they must have been Iranians. But they were not Iranians who had been admitted, through the *walā'* institution, into the imperial structure; therefore they must have been the rest of the Iranians. May be not all of the rest of the Iranians, we may add, since it is only natural not to expect that the entire population was involved. To Naṣr, however, it may have appeared to have been the case. These were, to Naṣr, the "motley mix (*man ta'ashshaba*)," to 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, "the languid and the obscure (*ahl al-khumūl*)," and, to us, in this book, the recent or the immediate Iranian converts, or simply 'the converts', whose conversion was their passport into the Organization and Revolutionary politics.

The recognizable religion belongs only to the Muslims, and to the Christians and the Jews—a proposition acceptable in the context. In verse 6, Naṣr finds the Revolutionaries to belong to none of the above: not to Islam, the religion he received "attributed to the Prophet (*'ani r-Rasūli*)," nor to any of the religions of *ahl al-kitāb*, the religions which had been "transmitted in the holy scriptures (*jā'at bihi-l kutubu*)." This leaves only the adherents to indigenous Iranian Magian denominations: Manichaean, Zoroastrian and Mazdakist. Of course, not all such adherents. To Naṣr, the array and the proximities must have been as

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instead of '*ṣamīmi l-mawālī*', in Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf III* and Ibn al-Athīr. See also Ibn A'tham's interesting addition of two last verses which, however, ring as unauthentic.

bewildering as they are to some of us today—myself included. However, the Revolutionaries' religion, which he characterizes as one "of which I never heard— ... attributed to the Prophet ... (*dīnan mā sami'tu bihi 'ani r-Rasūli* ...)" is of the same brand which 'Abd al-Ḥamīd fathomed as a result of their 'recent' conversion from "the worship of fire and idols (*mā hum bihi ḥadīthū 'ahd min 'ibādat al-nīrān wa al-awthān*);" it is also the same thing which the heresiographers, Madelung, and others, refer to as Khurramdīniyyah, Khurramiyyah, or Islamicized neo-Mazdakism, as will presently be advanced.

In view of the reports he was receiving about the Revolutionary atrocities against the Arabs in "Nasā, Ṭālaqān, Marw al-Rūdh, Āmul and Zamm,"[50] Naṣr's 7th verse may be excused for its out-of-character logical rashness. One must not, however, dismiss the verse as blatant propaganda. The exaggeration of the appalled governor-poet retains an invaluable first-hand contemporaneous expression of how it felt, to a proponent of the Arab Establishment, to face the human flood of the Iranian Revolution.[51]

With its geometric symmetry and precision, its contemporaneousness, and its documentary quality, Naṣr's demographic map of the Revolution stands out as the best frame of reference available from the period. It is a standard yardstick with clearly marked criteria for any pertinent demographic survey of the subject. It establishes the three Ethnic and Ethnic/Socio-Religious categories of the Criteria of Identity: the Arabs, the *mawālī*, and the converts. It also establishes the degree of acquired social recognition as an indicator of ethnic origin. By this it inspired the designing of the Criteria of Visibility and Recognition,[52] as will be expounded in part three of this book.

The poem also gives its own readings, gauged against its own criteria. The Revolutionaries (all of them in the language of poetry, which is not very hospitable to exceptions and allocations of majorities and minorities) were neither the Arabs nor the genuine *mawālī*.[53] They were

[50] *Akhbār*, p. 289.

[51] Cf. Agha, 'Abū Muslim,' p. 344, n. 62.

[52] For these terms and criteria, see chapter nine.

[53] Naṣr's own *ṣamīm al-mawālī*, however, had a nasty surprise for him down the road. The sons and grandsons of the house of Bassām, established *mawālī* of Naṣr's tribe, the Banū Layth of Kinānah, turned up in the Revolutionary camp: 'Abd Allāh ibn Bassām, 'Ubayd Allāh ibn Bassām, and the nephews Aḥlam ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Bassām and Bassām ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Bassām (nos.95, 359, 119 and 144 consecutively). 'Abd Allāh (or 'Ubayd Allāh, probably the same person?) especially was very close to Naṣr, he was his chief body guard (Ṭabarī, II: pp. 1723-4, 1846, 1859, 1923). He had been with the Organization since Bukayr's days, and he warned Bukayr of a move by Naṣr's men to arrest him (*Akhbār*, p. 233). When he discovered the family's treachery, Naṣr invoked God's wrath on them: 'Oh God, I had conferred favors on the house of Bassām, but they

Iranian peasants superficially converted to Islam for the purpose. They were an incognito mix unrecognizable to the tribally structured base and pillars of the Establishment which comprised ethnic Arabs and their well-known Iranian affiliates. The religious cocktail they mixed was also unrecognizable, but their motivation was—to slaughter the Arabs. Dilute this poetic exaggeration and you might come up with the real one: destroying Arab supremacy, even at the cost of a measured compromise of the Iranian religious heritage, i.e., by adopting and adapting the conquerors' religion.

This clearly sounds like ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, and to the minute details. But Naṣr's poem had been known to scholars, and therefore, ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd's recently discovered letter provides extra corroboration. Theoretically, both testimonies may be true or false. But they are there; and they speak for the classical school, loud and clear. It is the burden of the revisionists to tackle them heads on, and to disprove them. First, the *bāʾiyyah* ought not to have been dodged; and now both, it and ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd's letter, must not be dismissed.

III. *An Iranian Para-Islamic Revolutionary Continuum*

Naṣr ibn Sayyār's poem, ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd's letters, and the other textual material discussed earlier, establish the parameter of the remainder of the demographic issue, adequately define the points of contention, and clearly state their own positions on each. It may be valid to question these positions, but it is not valid to dismiss them off-handedly as propaganda. These points of contention are:

(1) How recent was the conversion of the cross-section targeted by the Umayyad characterizations?

(2) How numerous were they?

(3) Did they all flock to Abū Muslim; and, aside from their absolute size, what proportion of Abū Muslim's forces did they provide?

(4) Did they carry with them any old baggage from their previous denominations, thus, advertently or inadvertently, giving their pro-Umayyad adversaries the innocent impression of their infidelity, or the viciously manipulated excuse to attack them?

The first three questions have already been discussed,[54] and will be quantitatively addressed in part three of this book. The findings have proven, and will further prove the basic accuracy of the above textual

had denied me. Oh God, make them taste the heat of the sword' (Dārquṭnī, IV: p. 2205).

[54] See chapter six above.

materials. A major conclusion follows from these findings, namely, that the modification to Wellhausen's theory, which 'Abbās advocates should not be concerned with the motivations of the Revolutionaries. An important modification is indeed called for; namely, that it was not the integrated *mawālī*, in the strict legal and social sense of the word, who constituted the backbone of Abū Muslim's forces. It was those recent converts, the social, religious, economic and racial 'outcasts'—never accepted in the imperial structure of the Umayyad Establishment—who rose *en masse*, simultaneously and across the length and breadth of Khurāsan.[55]

In fairness to Wellhausen's thesis, it must be said that the modification is primarily a question of proportions. Strictly speaking, Wellhausen speaks of the Revolutionaries as being "'Abbāsid Shī'ites, mostly Iranian [who] had gathered under Abū Muslim's black standard;"[56] and he ascribes "the final ruin of the Umayyads" to "a rising of the Shī'ite Iranians in Khurāsān;"[57] and he does distinguish between "the *Mawālī* ... [and] the new converts."[58] His most direct demographic description of the Revolutionaries admits to a minority of Arabs, and a majority of Iranians comprising both peasants, i.e., converts, and *Mawālī*. Says he: "The majority of [Abū Muslim's] adherents consisted of Iranian peasants and of the Mawālī of the villages of Marw, but there were Arabs amongst them also who mostly occupied leading positions. The connecting element was the religion, the sect."[59] He did not specify a majority within the majority; nor did most of the materials accessible to him prompt him to be that specific. Our suggested modification does.[60]

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[55] Cf. supra, chapter three; Agha, 'Abū Muslim,' pp. 340-1, and passim; Dīnawarī, pp. 359-60; *Akhbār*, pp. 278, 284, 289, 293, 297.

[56] Wellhausen, p. 489.

[57] Ibid., p. 397.

[58] Ibid., p. 463.

[59] Ibid., p. 532.

[60] Responsible for inflating this issue are a number of factors: (a) Wellhausen's neglect to carry the distinction to the required lengths; (b) Despite his recognition of the financial maltreatment to which the Sughdian converts had been subjected (p. 463 f.), and rather than harping on the theme, Wellhausen focuses, all through, on the maltreatment of the *mawālī*, to the point of exaggeration. Actually, the 'genuine *mawālī*', to borrow Naṣr ibn Sayyār's phrase (*ṣamīm al-mawālī*) were comparatively privileged; whence Crone's suggestion of a modification of sorts to Wellhausen's thesis. She accurately ascribes to Wellhausen, as well as to Dennett and Gibb, a misplaced association of the '*mawālī* with fiscal disabilities,' and, again correctly, she suggests that 'the conventional picture applies only to a special type of convert' (Crone, 'Mawlā,' p. 878.b). But by specifying this type as 'the fugitive peasant,'she excludes all other stay-put peasant 'converts', or she converts the entire 'convert' peasantry to fugitives; (c) The inadvertent loose usage of the term *mawālī* in secondary literature, which drew on, or which summarized or commented on

The last of the above four questions has to do with the possible fusion (in the 'religion' of the cross-section of Revolutionaries targeted by above accusations) of beliefs and practices drawn from their recent Iranian denominations with Islamic beliefs. Specific charges of sustained worship of 'cats and heads' (*al sanānīr wa al-ru'ūs*), and of rejecting the totality of the revelation and accepting selectively certain specifics and twisting their meaning, in addition to general charges of recent and conceivably sustained 'worship of fire and idols,' and believing in a non-scriptural religion, resonate throughout contemporaneous textual evidence. Their close forerunners, those who had been converted at the hands of the Murji'ites, and who, in most probability, joined the ranks, had also been described as "people who do not pray."[61] Historians and heresiographers added to the list: the belief in transmigration, sexual licentiousness, genealogical mobility in transferring the *Imāmate* (or even divine personification) to Iranian *Imāms* and prophets—not least of whom were Khidāsh, Abū Muslim himself, his daughter Fāṭimah and her son Muṭahhar.[62]

An in-depth examination of the religious elements of this purported fusion of Islamic and Iranian beliefs is beyond the scope of this book. Here is a brief review of the issue.

Some modern Arab scholars paid intense attention to the issue, from a perspective which may have been influenced by the modern tensions between Arab and Persian nationalisms.[63] Quite aside from modern Arab projections, and contrary to 'Abbās' distinction of sorts between nationalistic motivations and proclaiming Islam as a slogan, Madelung recognized the inseparability of the two. Says Madelung:

> ... the eighth and ninth centuries witnessed a number of popular revolutionary movements in Iran which overtly mixed Persian and Islamic religious beliefs and motives. The generic name most often applied to these movements in the sources is Khurramdīniyya or Khurrammiyya ... The Khurramiyya represented Persian national sentiments looking forward to a restoration of Persian sovereign rule in contrast to the universalist religious tendencies of Manichaeism."[64]

Wellhausen. This literature fails to reflect the distinction between the two socio-religious classes of 'Muslim' Iranians; even if only to the extent Wellhausen himself did.

[61] Naṣr ibn Sayyār's poem on the Murji'ah, verse 10, in Ṭabarī, II: 1576, and in my translation, Agha, 'Murji'a,' p. 28.

[62] Madelung, 'Mazdakism'; idem, 'Khurramiyya'; supra, chapter one.

[63] See e.g. Dūrī, *Shu'ūbiyyah*; Haddārah, esp. pp. 203-280 and passim; Dūrī, *al-Ḥarakāt al-Haddāmah*.

[64] Madelung, 'Mazdakism,' pp. 1, 2. Although beyond our scope, Madelung's distinction between Mazdakism-Khurramiyyah, on the one hand, and Manichaeism, on the other hand, is of intense interest to the scholar of 'Abbāsid studies. It would appear

Preceeding and succeeding Abū Muslim and his followers, the almost uninterrupted string of Iranian rebels, apostate-'heretics' and heresies depicted in the Islamic sources—both historical and heresiographical—is bewildering: from the pre-Abū Muslim Khidāsh[65] to the 'ready-trigger' Sinbādh (no.342) through Rizām ibn Sābiq (no.321), Isḥāq al-Turk (no.217), Barāz (no.141), Ustādhsīs, and al-Muqanna' al-Khurāsānī Ḥāshim ibn Ḥakīm (no.181). Except for Ustadhsīs, whose personal name was not connected to Abū Muslim, and the connection of whose rising to "the memory of Abū Muslim" is debatable,[66] all the others came straight from the ranks of Abū Muslim's followers and generals. The string culminated with the famous revolt of Bābak, in Adharbayjān, starting in 201/816-817, outside the time frame with which we are concerned.[67] The array of 'heresies' associated with these movements, to which, in Madelung's words, "the generic name most often applied ... in the sources is Khurramdīniyya or Khurramiyya,"[68] includes: Rāwandiyyah, Muslimiyyah or Abū Muslimiyyah, Rizāmiyyah, Fāṭimiyyah,[69] Kūdakiyyah, Sunbādhiyyah, Mazdakiyyah, Mubayyiḍah,[70] and, of course, the earlier Khidāshiyyah and the later Muḥammirah of Bābak.[71]

Does this betoken a continuum of 'Islamicized' Iranian populist Mazdakism: starting with Khidāsh but defeated, triumphing at the hands of Abū Muslim, and rising in disappointment and indignation at the set back it received by the elimination of its hero? Or is Khidāsh to

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that al-Manṣūr's early crackdown on the Rāwandiyyah, Abū Muslimiyyah ... etc. had targeted nationalist Khurramī militant activists; while his son al-Mahdī's crackdown on the *zanādiqah*, and the sequel confrontation between the Mu'tazilites and the dualists, targeted the intellectually-oriented Manichaean streak of the Persian culture. Both streaks, however, survived both caliphs.

65 Supra, chapter one.

66 Daniel, *Khurasan*, p. 133 n. 56.

67 Ṭabarī, III: p. 1015, and passim.

68 Madelung, 'Mazdakism,' p. 1.

69 After Abū Muslim's daughter, not the Prophet's.

70 Followers of al-Muqanna', to be distinguished from the pro-Umayyad rebels who rose with Abū al-Ward in Qinnasrīn, in 132/750, and others, all of whom were also referred to as *Mubayyiḍah*. See Ṭabarī, III: pp. 52-9.

71 On these risings and heresies, see e.g.: Ṭabarī, III: passim; Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf III*: pp. 246, 229; Khalīfah, II: pp. 442-3, 453, 469; Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rīkh*, II: p. 368; Mas'ūdī, IV: pp. 144-5; Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, VIII: pp. 359-60, X: pp. 5, 14, 358-60; Dhahabī, *Siyar*, VI: p. 71; Ibn al-Athīr, IV: p. 357, V: p. 52, 58-9, 136; Ibn al-Nadīm, pp. 405-8; Narshakhī, pp. 24, 94-104; Azdī, p. 244; Ibn Khallikān, III: pp. 263-5; Shahrastānī, I: pp. 247-9, 288-9, II: p. 87; Baghdādī, *Firaq*, pp. 251-2, 255; Nawbakhtī, pp. 54, 57, 67-73; Ibn Ḥazm, *Fiṣal*, p. 28; Ash'arī, I: pp. 21-2; Qummī, pp. 44, 64-5, 69-70, 186; Nāshi', pp. 31-6, 38, 42. Cf. Madelung, 'Khurramiyya;' idem, 'Mazdakism,' he reviewed these movements in a condensed manner; so did Daniel (*Khurasan*, pp.125-156). Both, but Daniel especially, drew on G.H. Sadighi's *Les Mouvements religieux iraniens au II^e^ et au III^e^ siècle de l'hégire*, Paris, 1938.

be viewed as a dissident pro-ʿAlīd Shīʿite, Abū Muslim as a devout Muslim dedicated to a special brand of pure Islamic Shīʿism, who fought in the cause of egalitarian Islam and an Arab dynasty at the helm of an Organization led and overwhelmingly manned by other Arab partisans, and the post-Abū Muslim Khurramī movements as sudden sprouts of Iranian wrath, unconnected to the preceding events? Or, were Abū Muslim and his followers a mere interruption of the continuum, over which Iranian grass-roots populism and aspirations simply vaulted, to spring up in the immediate aftermath of his elimination, more vigorous and militant than ever?

Engrossed with a passion to demonstrate the sincerity of Abū Muslim's personal faith, and that his movement "was in no sense an anti-Islamic movement,"[72] Frye unequivocally establishes the Iranian ethnic identity of the majority of the Revolutionaries, but rejects the accusation that they were heretics. Says he:

> While heretics supported him, and infidels may have, there is no evidence that the latter flocked to his standard in large numbers, for Abū Muslim was quite strict, and especially would not tolerate apostasy.[73]

The examples Frye uses to support his statement, namely, Abū Muslim's execution of Bukhār Khudāh and Bih Afrīd for alleged apostasy, may, more convincingly, be attributed to more mundane reasons of political expediency. And one may take issue with the assertion of Abū Muslim's 'strict' religious standards. Even 'revisionist' scholars admit that he, or the *daʿwah* in general, did tolerate, and perhaps even indulge 'heretics'. However, we shall not dwell on these issues. What matters, from our point of view, is the extent to which the religious issue serves as an identifier of the ethnic background of the majority of the Revolutionaries. To this extent, Frye comes clean on the right side of the argument:

> ... it was only during the time of Abū Muslim that Khurāsān became definitely converted to Islām ... The call for a religious crusade against the Umayyads probably had little effect on the Arab tribes in Khurāsān, it seems to have had an effect on the new Iranian converts ... Arabs would not provide the bulk of the fighting force ... the Iranian Muslims were far more constant and reliable ... [they] became the backbone and mainstay of Abū Muslim's forces.[74]

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[72] Frye, p. 31.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid., pp. 31, 32, 33.

However, to Frye, "the series of [subsequent] heresies and revolts ... are another matter."[75] The question of a continuum is not among his concerns.

A continuum of sorts is, however, recognized by Daniel. He cites Sa'd al-Qummī:

> who notes that whereas the Rizāmiyya could be traced back to the Kaysāniyya (and thus had a very early connection with the 'Abbāsid movement?), the Abū Muslimiyyah were originally Magians (whom Abū Muslim had brought into the movement?) and formed the nucleus of what became the Khurramiyya.[76]

Daniel recognizes not only that these "sects originated from the same groups which had supported Khidāsh, Ibn Mu'āwiyah and other radicals;"[77] he also contends that Abū Muslim, during his life time, was their effective master or manipulator, as well as their symbol after his death:

> ... the *ghulāt* were active in Khurāsān long before Abū Muslim's murder. Their relations with him were ambivalent; they were tolerated or encouraged as long as they were useful, but they were repressed if they threatened to get out of control. They were present in the revolutionary army and could appear anywhere the Khurāsāni *jund* went ... some of them were closely associated with the *da'wa*, others had been co-opted into the 'Abbāsid movement.[78]

To Madelung, the existence of an established and deep-rooted continuum appears to be taken for granted. He smoothly goes right into the heart of both the religious and the ethnic issues, dedicating what ought to be the obvious. Says Madelung:

> [Mazdakism] required a movement of a similar revolutionary and syncretistic nature to bring about the fusion of Iranian dualist and Islamic elements apparent in the Khurramiyya. Such a movement arose in the Kaysāniyya ... The beginnings of the involvement of the Khurramiyya with the Kaysāniyya can probably be dated to the time of Abū Ḥāshim, the son of Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafiyya ... who ... set up a secret missionary organization ... known as the Hāshimiyya ... That some of his followers had been recruited among the Khurramiyya is indicated by the prominent role they soon began to play in both major branches into which the Hāshimiyyah split ... Among the branch supporting 'Abd Allāh b. Mu'āwiya ... an extremist Shī'ite, gnostic doctrine was taught by a certain 'Abd Allāh b. al-Ḥarb (or al-Ḥārith), who is described as the son of a *zindīq*, i.e., a dualist heretic ... according to the heresiographers, 'Abd

[75] Ibid., p. 38.
[76] Daniel, *Khurasan*, p. 131; Qummī, pp. 64-5.
[77] Daniel, *Khurasan*, p. 131.
[78] Ibid., pp. 130, 131.

> Allāh b. Ḥarb's doctrine also spread among the factions of the Khurramdīniyya ... In the other branch of the Hāshimiyya, which supported the imāmate of the 'Abbāsid Muḥammad b. 'Alī, the *dā'ī* nicknamed Khidāsh, who was active in the regions of Nīshāpūr and Marw around 111-118/729-736 is accused of having taught the religion of the Khurramiyya ... pseudo-Nāshi' ... identifies the Khurramiyya of Khurāsān with the Khidāshiyya ... The widest allegiance among the Khurramiyya all over Iran and Transoxiania was, however, gained by Abū Muslim al-Khurāsānī ... The widespread and fervent popular backing of Abū Muslim in Iran which is reflected in the religious allegiance of the Khurramiyya is a significant factor in the success of the 'Abbāsid revolution and must be stressed in view of recent interpretations which see the Revolution as essentially Arab. While the revolutionary army was led by Khurāsānian Arabs, it had the backing of the Persian populace, Muslim and non-Muslim. The Umayyad armies might not have collapsed so quickly if they had not been operating in enemy country ... There is no need to pursue the history of the Khurramiyya and their revolts here.[79]

The lengthy quotation affords an authoritative statement clearly blending the present religious issue with one of the two major theses which this book attempts to advance. The continuum of Islamism as fused with Iranian religious 'nationalism' (or what I wish to term as an Iranian para-Islamic revolutionary continuum) is nowhere more succinctly expressed. How this quotation, almost effortlessly, leads to the corroboration of a predominantly Iranian ethnic identity of the Revolution, is as compatible with the heresiographical literature as Wellhausen's sound conclusions are with the historical, and both with contemporaneous textual materials.

Thanks to a crackdown by the Umayyad authorities, not to the Bukayrist leadership in Kūfah, the Iranian movement under Khidāsh—not particularly subordinate to the mother Organization controlled by the *mawālī*—had been temporarily quelled. Bukayr did come back to Khurāsān to gather the pieces. Indeed, he reconstructed a bruised body. Certainly, he did not resurrect a dead corpse. He lent his Organizational genius and a form of Islamic legitimacy to a jinni whom neither he nor his successor would ever be able to squeeze back into its bottle. When Abū Muslim showed up, he did not have to fight for the leadership of a movement naturally growing in his direction. With hardly a jolt, it fell into his hands like a ripe fruit ready to part company with its mother branch. The question of an uninterrupted continuum of 'Islamicized neo-Mazdakism,' or Khurramiyyah, as indicated by Madelung, seems to us a foregone conclusion.

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[79] Madelung, 'Mazdakism,' pp. 7-8, 9.

In unison with the above and similar textual attestations, the pre-revisionist conventional wisdom attained its most mature formulation within the thesis advanced by Julius Wellhausen, which, in the words of a post-revisionist scholar, "became the standard interpretation of early Islamic history and dominated the secondary literature for more than fifty years." [80] In Khurāsān, the cradle of the Revolution, its launching pad, and the source of its continued sustenance, the numbers, i.e., the masses, were Iranian; the land was Iranian; the language, culture, the oppressed, the conquered, the just cause (by Islamic, if not by Arab-Muslim, standards), the historical depth, and the natural beneficiaries of a revolution, were all Iranian. These facts of life and of history, coupled with textual testimonies, factual indications, and the absence of serious source material to the contrary, gave the conclusion that the overriding ethnic character of the Revolution was Iranian its overpowering character of unavoidability and irrefutability. It flowed naturally, almost effortlessly, from the specifics and from the totality of the source material which (although it kept growing since Wellhausen) only adds further illuminating details and supporting evidence to the momentous repertoire that validates his view of the basic demographics of the Revolution. The revisionist legacy primarily rests on linguistic distortions and selective manipulations of isolated factors, mostly taken out of context, misconstrued and generalized to permeate the interpretation of the entire history of the period. With minor, or even major modifications regarding some demographic specifics, Wellhausen's basic demographics of the Revolution still hold true. The Revolution was Iranian. It was nourished and bred within a populist Iranian para-Islamic continuum.

The following quantitative part of this book draws on the yardstick of criteria established in the *bā'iyyah*. The data is garnered independently. The results match, producing essentially the same collective profile. An incidental aspect of the outcome is an unqualified vindication of Naṣr's representation and of the contemporaneous textual material.

[80] Daniel, *Khurasan*, p. 60, n.3.