

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Murabitun

The Murabitun in the Maghreb

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The Murabitun revolution was one of the few genuine mass movements in Islamic history. Growing out of the womb of Africa, it engulfed two continents and played a decisive role in historical developments in Africa and Spain alike. As a mass movement, European as well as Muslim scholars have studied it extensively. Ibn Khaldun used it as a basis for his theory of the rise and fall of civilizations. According to Ibn Khaldun, civilizations are held together by *asabiyah* (primal cohesiveness). The characteristics that foster cohesiveness are to be found in profusion among the nomads of the desert. The nomads, acting as agents of change, overcome older civilizations and bring in new blood as well as the virtues of the desert: integrity, virility, courage, steadfastness and commitment to the tribe. With time, they settle down, become city dwellers and succumb to the vices that characterize city life. Decay sets in, which in turn is overcome by a new wave of conquest from the desert. It was Ibn Khaldun's view that in the 11th century, Muslim North Africa and Spain had exhausted their virility to the vices of a luxurious city life. The Murabitun revolution was the tribal wave from the desert that overcame the corruption of city life and replaced it with the *asabiyah* of the desert.

Engel, one of the architects of Marxist thought, viewed the Murabitun revolution in purely economic terms. He held that the impoverished Sanhaja tribes of the desert wanted to punish the rich, morally lax city dwellers and confiscate their wealth. Max Weber, a German historian, held that both economic and religious elements were present in the uprising of the desert tribes.

It is our thesis that the causes for the rise and fall of Muslim societies are to be found in the internal dialectic of the community. Islamic history revolves around the axis of faith. It has been a recurrent effort of Muslims to construct their lives in accordance with the dictates of their faith. Even where the primary motives for a struggle were external, such as the resistance to European colonialism in West Africa in the 19th century or the struggles against foreign domination, they were packaged in religious terms.

The thrust of this global struggle is to create an ideal Islamic society enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong. This effort is guided by a consensus of the community based on the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet. Even where the trigger for a movement arises out of peripheral sources, the mass of the struggle always gravitates towards a consensus of the believers. In the 11th century, the Maghrib was rife with restlessness. The region had not yet recovered from the devastations wrought by Fatimid Egypt in the previous century. The majority of the Arabs and Berbers, who were Sunni, had

acquiesced to Fatimid rule but had never fully accepted it. The extremist Kharijites had established a kingdom in southern Algeria and had made significant headway in converting a large number of people to their point of view. The peripheral Fatimid and Kharijite sources applied an impulse for change and the center of mass based on Sunni Islam was beginning to stir. *The Murabitun revolution was thus a mass expression of a desire to reform and restore Sunni Islam over competing visions offered by the Kharijites and the Fatimids.*

The region of Mauritania, inhabited by the Sanhaja, was the cradle for the Murabitun revolution. The word Murabitun derives its origin from the word *rabat*, meaning, a fortress guarding a frontier. In the year 1035, Yahya bin Ibrahim, a leader of the Sanhajas, performed his Hajj. On his return from Mecca, he stopped off at the great University at Kairouan, a stronghold of the Maliki School of *Fiqh*. Yahya bin Ibrahim requested the rector of the university, Abu Imran al Farsi to send one of his students to Mauritania. Abu Imran chose one of his former students, Abdullah bin Yasin. On their way through southern Algeria, the caravan passed through areas where the influence of splinter groups such as the Kharijites was strong. Deeply disturbed, Abdullah bin Yasin resolved to wage a struggle to revive orthodox Islam in West Africa.

The Maghrib was seething with discontent and the Murabitun rapidly consolidated their hold on the region. By 1051 the entire area west of Kairouan was under their sway. For administrative purposes, Abdullah bin Yasin kept the oversight of the southern regions consisting of Senegal, Mauritania and southern Morocco under his direct control while delegating the management of the northern territories around the Mediterranean basin to his cousin Yusuf bin Tashfin. While political consolidation was taking place in North Africa, Muslim power in Spain was rapidly disintegrating. It had been more than 300 years since Tariq had landed his troops across the straits of Gibraltar and having burned the boats that had ferried his men across the narrow straits that separate Africa from Europe, commanded them to move forward in the name of *Tawhid*.

The faith that had propelled Tariq into Europe in 707 had by the year 1051 dissipated and given way to politics and opportunism. The Omayyad Caliphate in Cordoba had dissolved in the year 1032 and in its place sprang up petty principalities jostling with each other for prestige and power. The cohesion fostered by faith had given way to opportunism based on tribal and family loyalties. But tribe and family cannot replace the transcendence of faith based on *Tawhid*. Spain was therefore like a piece of cracked glass ready to shatter.

Meanwhile, in Europe, Pope Urban II declared a Crusade for the conquest of Jerusalem (1095). The thrust of the Crusaders in the early part of the 12th century had been Sicily, North Africa and Spain. The disintegration of the Caliphate of Cordoba and the simultaneous regression of Fatimid power in Egypt was an invitation for European powers to flex their muscles. Roger II captured Sicily, providing a base in the Mediterranean for the invasion of Palestine. In 1060, the Crusaders raided the North African coast but could not hold onto their gains due to the resurgent Murabitun power. However, these were only sideshows. The first pitched battles of the Crusades were fought on Spanish soil. It was here that the crescent and the cross met in battle, almost fifty years before the focus shifted to Palestine, Syria and the city of Jerusalem. And when the ledger of the Crusades was drawn up 300 years later, it was Spain that was first won and was then lost from the fold of Islam.

The Crusades began in earnest in Spain in 1017. Rallied by the Church, knights from France streamed into Spain to join the local Crusaders against the Muslims. In 1026, Sancho captured Castile and made it the capital of his kingdom. His son Ferdinand I captured Leon in 1037. By 1063, he had subjugated most of the areas north of the River Duero, in an arc extending from Lisbon, Madrid, Barcelona on the

Mediterranean coast. By the time he died in 1065, Ferdinand had forced the Muslim principalities of Saragossa, Toledo, Seville and Badojoz into paying him tribute. But this was only the beginning. It was during the reign of his son Alfonso VI that the Christians made major advances. In 1085, Alfonso VI captured the ancient city of Toledo. The vast libraries and learning centers of this ancient capital fell into Christian hands. The intellectual stimulus from Toledo was the first in a series that was to liberate medieval Europe from its Dark Age.

The fall of Toledo set off a chain reaction. Europe was jubilant. Alarm bells rang through Muslim Spain. But the petty rivalries among the principalities made a concerted resistance to the Christian onslaught impossible. Meanwhile, the Murabitun revolution had swept through North Africa and was knocking on the doors of Spain. The purity of faith championed by the Murabitun struck a resonant chord with the Spanish Muslims. The Andalusian population was toiling under oppressive taxes levied by the emirs to support their own extravagant and lavish courts and to pay off the annual tribute to Christian marauders. The *ulema* realized that faith alone would provide the shield against the Crusaders. They gathered from all over Andalus in Seville and demanded that the emirs approach the Murabitun for help. In 1086, one year after the fall of Toledo, the emirs of Seville, Granada and Badojoz sent an emissary to Yusuf bin Tashfin asking him to intervene.

Yusuf bin Tashfin, the leader of the northern wing of the Murabitun movement, was well aware of the divisions among the rulers of Spain and was at first hesitant to enter the fray. But he was moved by the repeated pleas from the *ulema*. In 1086, he crossed the Straits with an army of 80,000 men. His Sinhaja, Berber and African troops were battle hardened after campaigns in Africa and were animated by faith. Some of the troops came from as far south as Timbaktu and Gao. Ibn Khaldun records that the Murabitun followed the strategies taught by the Prophet at the Battle of Badr. They were fighting for faith and would not quit a battle until victory was achieved. The armies of Seville, Granada and Badojoz joined the Murabitun, swelling the ranks of the Muslim soldiers to over 150,000.

At the time, Alfonso VI and his Crusader knights were ravaging Saragossa in the north. Upon hearing of the arrival of the Murabitun, he turned around and the two armies met on the fields of Zallaqa, near Badojoz. Up until this time, the European knights had enjoyed the advantage of heavy armor. But Yusuf had brought with him Turkish archers with their powerful Cossack bows. The African soldiers, armed with shields of hippo hide and long spears of steel, marched to the deafening sounds of African drums. The earth shook as the battle was engaged. The Crusaders suffered a crushing defeat with over 80,000 infantry and 20,000 cavalymen dead. Alfonso VI was himself wounded several times but managed to escape with his bodyguard in the darkness of night. After the victory, the Spanish emirs quarreled among themselves over the spoils of war. Disgusted, Yusuf bin Tashfin, withdrew into Morocco.

Alfonso VI turned to Christian Europe for help and within a year was back on the rampage again. His able lieutenant El Cid (from Arabic, *ya sidi* or *al Syed*), Rodrigo Diaz de Bivar held Saragosa and Valencia. Another of his knights, Garcia Jimenez, ravaged Muslim territories all the way into Seville. The Emir of Seville, the learned and cultivated al Mutamid, could not contain the Christians. In desperation, he turned once again to North Africa for help.

Yusuf bin Tashfin crossed into Spain a second time in 1089. The emirs of Seville, Granada, Malaga, Almeria, Murcia and Badojoz promised their support. Battle lines were drawn. El Cid joined up with Alfonso VI and advanced towards the Murabitun camp. But just before the engagement, quarrels broke out again among the emirs. Yusuf bin Tashfin had no desire to face the Crusaders with a divided camp and withdrew into Africa. This time, however, he made up his mind to depose the emirs and absorb Andalus into Murabitun territory.

In 1090, Yusuf bin Tashfin crossed into Spain a third time. His first act was to depose the emirs of Granada and Malaga who had deserted him at the hour of battle. Meanwhile, Al Mutamid, the emir of Seville, read the signs correctly that he was next in line for a Murabitun takeover. To preserve his emirate, he sought an alliance with Alfonso VI. However, the Murabitun intercepted this correspondence. Al Mu'tamid was deposed to North Africa along with his household. He died penniless in the city of Aghmat in the year 1095. He is best known in history as a great poet, whose expression of pathos in poetry presaged that of the last Moghul Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar of India by more than seven hundred years.

The Murabitun conquered Andalus as far north as Toledo and as far east as Barcelona. Alfonso VI and his Crusader knights suffered one defeat after another But El Cid continued to hold out against Yusuf bin Tashfin and blocked a major Murabitun advance up the Mediterranean coast. Yusuf bin Tashfin died in the year 1106. Alfonso VI died in the year 1109.

The confrontation between Yusuf bin Tashfin and Alfonso VI took place while the First Crusade raged in Palestine resulting in the fall of Jerusalem in 1099. The Murabitun represented an upsurge of faith amidst the corruption and laxity of 11th century Spain. They held the Andalusian peninsula for the Muslims for over a hundred years and were successful in pushing back the Crusaders beyond the Pyrenees Mountains into France. Were it not for the Murabitun, the fearless, veiled warriors from the womb of Africa, the Crusaders might well have inflicted far more damage to the Muslims of the eastern Mediterranean, in Syria, Egypt and Palestine. Yusuf bin Tashfin, as one of the architects of the Murabitun revolution, is celebrated as a key figure in the Islamic defense against the Spanish Crusades.

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