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Ninth-Century Muslim Anarchists

David Baker

July 2011

The article centers around a discussion that was taking place in Basra in southern Iraq in the 800s. There was a general consensus that the Abbasid Caliphate, which controlled a vast empire from Baghdad, had become corrupt and tyrannical. So the question among the scholars became how the Ummah should respond to a leader who had become “all too reminiscent of Pharaoh,” as Crone puts it. This article was originally published in 2000 in Past & Present Journal. But in light of recent events in the Middle East I think it’s valuable to pick up the discussion where they left off.

The mainstream opinions are broadly categorized as “activists” and “quietists” by Crone. The activists held that when a leader lost legitimacy it was obligatory to stage a violent revolution and install a new legitimate leader. The quietists held that civil war was worse than oppression and it was obligatory to patiently persevere under tyranny. You had to obey the tyrant, or at the most resist passively. For whatever reason, the quietist position has been the dominant position, even until today, even though it contradicts the opinion of Abu Bakr who said upon his inauguration, “Obey me as long

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A review of “Ninth-Century Muslim Anarchists” by Patricia

Crone

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as I obey God and His Prophet. But if I disobey God's command or His Prophet, then no obedience is incumbent upon you." The quietist position undoubtedly has contributed to the current state of political affairs in the Muslim majority countries. Unfettered state power is and always will be expanding state power.

There was a third category of solutions they were exploring which Crone calls "anarchist" in the general sense, but not in the Western sense. Most Western anarchist thought originates from an imagined egalitarian past before the emergence of the state, and without private property. As Crone puts it, "Western anarchism is in essence the belief that we can return to the condition of innocence from which we have fallen." Most of the Muslim anarchists were only anarchists in the sense that they believed that the society could function without the Caliph. Crone calls them, "reluctant anarchists." For them anarchism was not a lost ideal they hoped to return to, but the acknowledgment that the ideal, the Medina Caliphate, was lost, and could not be restored.

They proposed a kind of evolutionary anarchism. They made no proposal to abolish private property, except to say that the illegitimacy of the ruler spoiled the validity of titles to property, presumably those granted by the ruler. This may be similar to the way some modern libertarians view eminent domain, corporate title and intellectual property as invalid. Predominantly it was factions among the Mu'tazilites, the Kharijites and the Sufi's who proposed that if leaders kept turning into tyrants perhaps they'd be better off without leaders at all.

Essentially they argued that the Caliph must be agreed upon by the entire community, either unanimously or by consensus, and without this no legitimate Caliph could exist. It was widely accepted that Allah did not impose obligations which were impossible to fulfill, so it was reasoned that there was no obligation to establish a legitimate Caliph. Although almost none of them denied the possibility of a legitimate Caliph emerging in the future, but in the mean time alternatives had to be explored. Some pointed out

that the Bedouin's had got along fine without rulers. Crone writes, "anarchists were clearly drawing on the tribal tradition which lies behind all early Islamic political thought of the type which may be loosely identified as libertarian."

Crone didn't specify this in the article, but this view of the Caliphate is consistent with the hadith in which the Prophet informed us that after him would be the Caliphate, then there would be kings, then there would be tyranny. If you accept this hadith it's clear the Ummah has progressed from Caliphs to kings, and hard to argue it hasn't progressed to full blown tyrannies. Viewed this way, any attempt to reestablish the Caliphate by force could only result in further tyranny. Their specific reasons for arguing against the Caliphate is not particularly relevant to us today since there has not been a Caliphate, legitimate or otherwise, since the collapse of the Ottoman empire. The reality for us is this is less an intellectual exercise and more a practical necessity, especially in light the tenuous hold the current tyrannies hold over their people.

Their proposed solutions ranged from a radical decentralization of public authority to a complete dissolution of public authority.

A genre of proposals involved replacing the Caliph with elected officials, the argument being that if you polled enough people you minimized the danger of bias and collusion which had become the signature of the Caliphate. We'll call these proposals "minarchist" in modern parlance. They proposed that people could elect trustworthy and learned leaders within their local communities, the argument being that there could never be unanimous agreement upon one leader of the Ummah and one could not assess the quality of candidates at great distances. These leaders could either be completely independent of one another, or they could be joined together in a federation, the argument being that independent leaders would forever be fighting with their neighbors. This is strikingly reminiscent of the federalist vs. anti-federalist debate that took place in the American colonies 1,000 years later.

Some minarchists viewed these elected officials as temporary, only remaining in office when legal disputes arose, or when an enemy invaded. When the problem was resolved they would lose their position, similar to an imam when he has finished leading prayer, and society could return to anarchy. This is very similar to the stateless judicial system in Somalia today, which we will discuss in the future.

Admittedly the minarchist proposals were not really anarchist. They advocated abolishing the form of government to which they had grown accustomed and replacing it with systems with far more public participation. Most of them were proposing new forms of government for which they had no historical precedent. But there were still some who were true anarchists in that they wanted a complete dissolution of public authority. Some argued that a sufficiently moral society would have no need for authority, while others argued that because society was not sufficiently moral they couldn't have a legitimate authority. Either way they believed that the welfare of society would be best if people were only left alone.

The most prominent group which called for the complete abolition of the state was a minority sect called the Najdiyya. They argued that so long as there was not sufficient agreement to establish a legitimate Caliph, there could never be enough to establish law at all. Even consensus (ijma') could not be a source of law in a community where no unified consensus existed anyway. To the Najdiyya every individual was responsible for his own salvation, and entitled their own legal interpretations through independent reasoning (ijtihad). Indeed, any intellectual tradition must be built on this foundation because in order to persuade others to adopt it you must first appeal to their independent reasoning. They not only demanded political independence but complete intellectual independence because believers were, as the Prophet said, "like the teeth of a comb" and therefore should have no master but God Himself. Divine law could be conceived of as the natural law, available to all mankind, like fingerprints in the clay of Adam. Crone calls

this "radical libertarianism" and as far as I can tell it is one of the first appearances of it in history.

None of the anarchists or minarchists explained how to put their proposals into practice while the state still existed. They merely speculated, leaving it to future generations to implement their radical reform. We may be those generations. None of them proposed fomenting rebellion, happy to enjoy the comforts the state provided it's intellectuals. Only the Sufi's avoided material comforts, but their solution was simply to transcend politics and seek meaning in other pursuits, not to revolt.

However, in 817 anarchy was foisted upon them when the government in Baghdad collapsed. A civil war had ousted the previous Caliph and the influence of the new Caliph hadn't been established yet. Chaos ensued, and the public responded, as many would have predicted, by forming a vigilante group to protect property, maintain commerce and allow the meek to move freely through Baghdad. This is exactly the kind of spontaneous order we saw in Egypt when police in plainclothes picked fights and looted stores. Civilians self-organized into neighborhood watch programs to protect each other. We see now what they saw then, in the absence of public authority there is a natural emergence of order out of chaos without central planning. The Muslim anarchist of the ninth century concluded, as many have in the modern world, "that when people are forced to rely on themselves, they discover talents they did not know they had."