

Neither Shi'a nor Sunni: An Interview with a Mozabite

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The Ibadi perspective on the early caliphate differs from that of both Sunnis and Shi'a. From their point of view, the only legitimate way to come to power is not through familial or tribal affiliation or through divine selection, but through selection by the leading men of the Muslim community (Hoffman 2012: 7).

The Mozabites are peculiar in several respects. They represent a small Berber island in an Arab sea; they are the only city-dwellers in the Sahara; they practice a fierce and exclusive form of Islamic puritanism but in an urban and not a tribal frame of society; and they have kept their institutions intact (Alport 1954: 34).

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The above quotes give some introduction to the topic of this essay, which is the Mozabite people. The Mozabites live in the Mzab region of the northern Sahara in Algeria and are Ibadi Muslims. This piece is a reflection on a series of interviews I conducted between 2008–2009 with Mustapha, an Ibadi from the Mzab. Before discussing Mustapha's insights, however, I will provide some brief background information on the subject and my own interests in it.

I must firstly note that I have never been to the Mzab, but became interested in the region through my broader research. Second, while I have a degree in the History of Religion, I am not a specialist in Islamic Studies or North Africa. My interaction with the Mzab has been relatively cursory, though it is, I believe, enough to present an introduction to this seldom-addressed subject, and discuss the thoughts of my interviewee.

After doing research on different varieties of Islamic anarchism, I became interested in some of the ways small societies have been able to sustain relatively independent cultures for long periods of time. I was particularly drawn to what has sometimes been described as a third branch of Islam: Ibadism. The history of the Ibadi school of Islam dates to the period of the late 650s in which Sunnis and Shi'as split – before these categories were even conceptualized. The split within Islam came to a head during the reign of the fourth caliph, Ali, cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad. When his leadership was challenged by Muawiyah, battle erupted, and the first two lines of division were set: those who had backed Ali were to become Shi'a – the party of Ali – and those who accepted the lineage of caliphs after him (including Muawiyah) eventually became identified as Sunni.

When Ali chose to lay down arms and resolve the matter through arbitration, groups of former supporters left Ali's camp and a third line of division was created. These former supporters are often referred to as Kharijites, or 'seceders', and are said to have rebelled violently but there were in fact multiple groups who seceded. Some of those who took up arms against Ali did so for what they believed to be betrayal and mistrust in God's ability to win them victory on the battlefield. They are among the most notorious figures in Islamic history; Ali was eventually assassinated by a Kharijite. However, they have also become some of the most misrepresented in Islamic history. Others who seceded simply withdrew their support for Ali but did not take up arms against him. It is from the lineage of this group that the Ibadis claim their heritage.

This context is relevant by way of introduction to the discussion of the Ibadis as they are often characterized as a branch of Kharijites. Although no self-identifying Kharijite group survives today, the term is still used pejoratively to describe an opponent as violently intolerant. It is important to note that Ibadis reject that label. While they agree with Khar-

ijites on the principle that a Muslim ruler ought to be the most pious Muslim and not necessarily related to the Prophet, they condemn the overbearing violence and intolerance ascribed to the Kharijites. As Ibadi and Assistant Grand Mufti of Oman, Kahlan Al-Kharusi, wrote:

Nearly all of the sub-groups of the Khawārij [Kharijite] took an extreme view, defined corrupt Muslims as unbelievers and so applied laws demanding repentance or execution. This is the quality that is most remembered about the Khawārij in major religious circles today. The Ibādī sect does not inherit any of these defining ideological features (2015: 140).

To the extent that one could speak of Shi'as as forming a separate school of Islam, the same could therefore be said of Ibadis. In their theology and interpretations, they emphasize the Qur'an more than hadith and, unlike dominant currents across the Muslim world, it is not uncommon for Ibadis to view the Qur'an as created, rather than eternal. Today Ibadis number a few million in places as diverse as Zanzibar, Libya, Tunisia, and Oman – the only country where they comprise the majority. They have also sustained seven urban enclaves in the Mzabi desert of Algeria known in their own language, Tumzabt, as At-Isjen, At-Mlisht, At-Bonour, Tajnint, Igraren, At-Ibergan, and the largest town Tagherdait (Ghardaia), which a population of approximately 100,000. It was more than a 1,000 years ago that they developed a sophisticated irrigation system including six dams and approximately 3,000 wells (some as deep as 80 meters) that enabled them to thrive in this desert area. Although the Mozabites are Ibadis, and they maintain relations with Ibadis in other regions, they also have their own distinct culture. They have their own free schools, their own businesses, and their own architecture.

In conducting my initial research on the Mozabite community, I noticed that while some scholars and journalists had written about the Mzab, few have ever spoken directly with Mozabites from the region. I searched the Internet to find someone from the Mzab who spoke English and would be willing to speak with me. Eventually I stumbled across several Mozabites who were interested in presenting information about themselves and their culture. I therefore became acquainted with Mustapha whom I was able to interview. I was also driven to interview someone from within the community in order to clarify some misconceptions about the Mozabites. Some have claimed that Mozabites are exempt from Algerian military service and that police do not patrol Mozabite towns. Mustapha denied both claims and assured me that Mozabite men are required to serve as much as others, and that Algerian police patrol all Mozabite towns.

However, it was the topic of the nation-state and how the Mozabite community is organized that I found the most interesting when speaking with Mustapha. He explained that while they believed in the necessity of an Imamate or Muslim state, they did not insist that the leaders were Ibadi. In fact, he referred to the Algerian state as a Muslim government, and therefore fully acceptable to the community. They had concluded rather pragmatically that it would not always be possible to organize themselves into an independent state. As he described, they can choose either revolution or patient compliance. In the course of a revolution, then they may win – and establish an Imamate – or they may lose. Any survivors would have to choose between organizing guerilla warfare or patiently organizing themselves without an Imamate, while biding their time until it is possible to establish one. This final alternative, of waiting for more opportune circumstances, is called *al-kitman* and is the stage where the Ibadis in the Mzab have always been and where they remain.

What I found fascinating was how they took this situation as an opportunity to organize themselves with a relatively significant degree of autonomy. Though the community has friendly relations with the Ibadis in Oman, they do not recognize Sultan Qaboos of Oman as the head of their own Imamate. Instead, they have developed an independent council, the 'seminar of Azzaba,' whose mission, according to Mustapha, is to make decisions that affect 'religious and social' issues in Mzab. Within this structure, they have partial autonomy in Algeria and, alongside state-run schools, are able to run their own free schools where they teach Islam, Arabic, and Ibadi history. However, as Mustapha explained to me, while an Imamate comprises a full authority state with all political and governmental power, the Azzaba is solely concerned with social and religious matters, which, according to him, limits its power.

Each Mozabite city, as well as Ouargla – which is the only city outside the Mzab – has its own Azzaba, and representatives from each council together constitute a federal council called *Ammi Said*. In terms of their internal structure, the Azzaba appoints *oumana* (trustees) to manage each city's affairs such as building rules, market regulations, and managing valley barrages and water resources. The Azzaba also initially created the *timsiridin* (washers), a group of women who tend to women's affairs, but this council acts independently now. When something such as a home needs to be built, the Azzaba has a kind of spontaneous arrangement of mutual aid called *touiza* where volunteers organize to do the work together. In addition to the Algerian police, they have their own voluntary patrols guarding their area. The Azzaba councils are run by volunteers, according to Mustapha, and therefore require no taxes.

The semi-autonomy of the Mozabites stems in part from the religious and social authority wield-

ed by the Azzaba within each city. As Mustapha explained, 'people pressure' is the best way to keep power in check given the lack of financial or electoral accountability. In this way, the Azzabas enforce their decisions through social, 'not political', pressure.

What appears to be most clear about the Azzaba for the Mozabites is the important social role they play. When Mustapha and I discussed difference between the 'social and religious decisions' that the Azzaba may take, the difference appeared to be fluid, and rooted in discretion and circumstance. In fact, such decisions are treated equally, and it is not stated if a decision is social or religious when it is announced. Mustapha particularly emphasized the 'personal discretion' involved in the Azzaba's rulings, rather than religious law. As he said to me, the Islamic law that the Azzabas draw on can be flexible according to conditions and circumstances. The non-bureaucratic character of their authority can be seen in the delivery of their unwritten declarations: often in the mosques' daily sermon.

The most vivid example Mustapha gave of the Azzaba's role in society reflects their religious and social blend. When modern technologies such as television and radio first reached the Mzab region, the Azzaba attempted to confront the issue and their new presence in society. As a result, these technologies were banned, according to Mustapha, due to the music and 'immoral materials' they brought to the community. However, in observing both the positives and the negatives of such technologies, the Azzaba began to understand the function they could serve, and decided to utilize only their positive aspects, allowing such items in the community. This pragmatic approach reflects more widely the persistence of the Mzab community: maintaining their traditions in the Azzaba while participating in Algerian society as they wait for the Imamate.

I maintained contact with Mustapha throughout 2008 and 2009 and most recently spoke with him in 2013. It was 2013 that saw the beginning of the most violent conflicts in decades between the local Arabs and the Mozabite Berbers (Reuters 2015). Mustapha and I had spoken about the history of such conflicts with the local Arab population, and he explained how they can even be sparked by rather random incidents such as children's fireworks going in the wrong direction. The recent conflicts (2013–2015) led to several dozen people killed on both sides and many Mozabite homes and businesses destroyed. Now a new generation, including human rights activist Dr. Kamel Eddine Fekhar who founded *Mouvement pour l'Autonomie du Mzab*, has organized self-defence groups and is challenging the traditionally more conservative response of Mozabite elders. Today, in reflecting on what I learned from Mustapha, I can only imagine how these conflicts have affected him. While this thought is somewhat somber to conclude with, I write it while recalling that he comes from a

community with a long history that lives on in these customs and organizations. It is their persistence to live their own lives as minorities, inevitably in some degree of tension with the world around them, that first inspired me to reach out to him.

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