“NON-ARAB REGIMENTS AND PRIVATE MILITIAS DURING THE UMAYYÁD PERIOD”*

BY

KHALIL ʿATHAMINA
Birzeit University

From the very beginnings of the formation of the Arab-Muslim military institution during the reign of ʿUmar I, a number of ideological and organizational obstacles were prominent in the development of the institution. Non-Arab ethnic communities and non-Muslim religious communities found themselves incapable of coping with the entrance requirements of this military institution. Even ʿArāb, members of the Arab tribes who where both Arabs and Muslims, found that the road to joining the ḏīwān was closed to them as early as a single decade—or two at the most—after the formation of this institution.

The growing need to enlist new soldiers in order to materialize the ambitious expansion plans of the Madina government—and later, of the Umayyad Dynasty—encountered an obstacle presented by the tribal organizational structure of the ḏīwān forces, the very same tribal structure that made the issue of loyalty to one’s ruler the constant dream and aspiration of the Umayyad rulers.

Civil wars, of which there were three during the reign of this dynasty (a reign which lasted less than a century) on the one hand, and the competition for power on the part of rival entities inside and outside the dynasty on the other hand, brought about a gradual attenuation of the extent to which the ruler and their rivals depended upon the ḏīwān forces. Each such entity began to seek ways of gaining military strength that could be relied upon when the time came. The rebellions which frequently broke out on the part of adventurers yearning

* This article was presented in its original version in the third workshop of Late Antiquity and Early Islam: States, Resources and Armies, held in King’s College London, 29-31 October 1992.

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 1998

Arabica, tome XLV
for the throne as well as on the part of political-religious opposition groups, reduced considerably the recruitment potential of certain Arab tribes which had been involved in those rebellions and of certain geographical regions whose population had shown support for or collaborated with one rebel or another.

All of these and other reasons brought about the collapse of the obstacles which had precluded the induction of the mawālī (non-Arab converts) and diimmīs (non-Muslims), paving the way for the mobilization of private militias from every possible source. In this paper I shall attempt to draw a general picture of the formation, specialization, modus operandi and enlistment methods of these regiments and militias during the period in question.

I

From the chronological point of view, the Asāwira comprise the first non-Arab group to have joined the Arabs’ fighting force.1 Despite the fact that the Asāwira were not the militia of a purely private party, they can be included, somehow, in the list of private militias, for two reasons: first, because they were the clients—the allies—of the Tamīm tribe in Baṣra, and at the same time, because they were subject to the authority of the local governor, who had been sent on behalf of the central regime. But the Asāwira’s bond to the Tamīm tribe was sometimes greater than their bond to the regime itself, and they behaved as a private militia on behalf of that tribe.2 The history of the Asāwira teaches us that they were outstanding horsemen in the Sassānian legions, as is indicated by their name3 The Asāwira occupied the highest rank on the social ladder in the days of the Sassanian Empire, alongside the nobility of the royal Persian court.4 Among all the drinking companions (nudamē) of the Sassanian Emperor, the Asāwira were responsible for guarding the curtain which separated the royal throne from those members of the nobility who were present at court. This hereditary position was reserved solely for the members of this group.5

The first contacts between the Arabs and the Asāwira was an ancient one, going back many years before the invasion of Persian territory

---

1 The Asāwira joined in 638/17; see Ţab., I, 2563.
2 Ţab., II, 465.
3 al-Khwarizmi, 71.
4 al-Taḡ, 23-4.
5 Ibid., 28.