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## THE ROLE OF THE KHARIJITE MOVEMENT IN THE POLITICAL PROCESSES IN KHURASAN

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### Abstract

This article analyzes the role and influence of the Kharijite movement in the political processes that took place in the Khurasan region. In particular, it examines the formation of the Kharijite movement under conditions of socio-political instability in Khurasan and adjacent territories during the 8th–9th centuries, its spread among various strata of the local population, and its role in the struggle against central authority.

The study also explores the economic, political, and religious factors behind the Kharijite uprisings, their attitude toward the authority of the Abbasid Caliphate, and their impact on the political situation in the region, based on historical sources. The article substantiates that the Kharijite movement in Khurasan developed in connection with the interests of local social groups, particularly peasants and small landowners, which became an important factor in regional political struggles and movements for power.

**Keywords:** Kharijites, Kharijite movement, Khurasan, socio-political processes, uprisings, religious-political movements, local population, peasants, tax policy, central authority, Abbasid Caliphate, early medieval history.

### Introduction

The Kharijite (Khawarij) sect, which emerged in the early Islamic period, originated as a result of the political conflict between Ali ibn Abi Talib (656–661) and Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan (661–680). These two figures are regarded as the fourth and fifth caliphs, respectively. When their armies confronted each other at the Battle of Siffin in 657, a radical group within Ali's army opposed his agreement to arbitration with Muawiya and withdrew their allegiance (bay'ah).



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The term “Kharijites” derives from the Arabic word *kharaja* (“to go out” or “to secede”), referring to those who broke away from Ali’s army and formed a distinct religious-political movement. They believed that judgment belongs solely to God and rejected human arbitration (*taḥkīm*) in such matters.

Initially based in Lower Iraq among Arab tribal groups, the more radical factions of the Kharijites, led by Nafi ibn al-Azraq (d. 685), were driven out and retreated to southwestern regions of Iran. His followers formed one of the most extreme branches within the Kharijite movement, known as the Azariqa.

Establishing Ahvaz as their base, they threatened the city of Basra and advanced eastward into the provinces of Fars and Kirman, extending their activities as far as Isfahan and Ray [1].

The Zubayrid governor of Basra, Abdullah ibn al-Harith al-Hashimi, dispatched troops against them, and in 685 Nafi ibn al-Azraq was killed near Dulab, close to Ahvaz [2].

He was succeeded by a new leader, referred to by the Kharijites as “caliph” — Qatari ibn al-Fuja’a (d. ca. 697–698). He continued resistance against Umayyad forces for a long period in the mountainous regions of Fars and Kirman. Qatari minted coins bearing inscriptions in Arabic and Pahlavi and used the title “Amir al-Mu’minin.” These coins were struck in cities such as Ardashir-Khwarrah, Bishapur, and Darabgird [3].

Later, the Umayyad commander al-Muhallab ibn Abi Sufra (d. 702/703) pursued Qatari as far as Tabaristan and killed him between 696 and 698. His remaining followers were completely defeated in Qumis.

During the final period of Umayyad rule, the center of the Kharijite movement shifted to Upper Mesopotamia (Northern Iraq and the Jazira region). However, their supporters continued to exist in the mountainous areas of southern Iran.

During the “Abbasid Revolution” of 747–748, the Kharijites, to some extent, supported the Abbasids on the basis of political opportunism.

Kharijites arriving from Kirman established particularly strong influence in the region of Sistan. They were more active in rural areas than in the capital, Zarang. During this period, the Kharijite movement was mainly composed of Arab tribal groups and retained a certain aristocratic character in spiritual terms.



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Later, one of the Kharijite leaders, Shayban ibn Abdulaziz al-Yashkuri, fled from Iraq to Sistan and attempted to gain support in Zarang, but he was soon killed.

During the Abbasid period, the Kharijites once again engaged in struggles against central authority. Their activities continued particularly in Kirman, Sistan, and the peripheral regions of Khurasan—Badghis and Kuhistan.

In 795–796, a major uprising began in the eastern regions. This movement was led by the Iranian leader Hamza ibn Azarak (d. 828). In 797, Hamza returned directly to Sistan from the pilgrimage (hajj). In the village of Baskar, he met with 5,000 Kharijite representatives led by Khalifa al-Khariji [4]. Hamza originated from the region of Rukhkhaj in present-day southeastern Afghanistan. His followers belonged to the Ajarida branch of the Kharijites and later formed the Hamziyya group.

Thus, the groundwork was laid for a large-scale Kharijite uprising led by Hamza ibn Azarak (or Abdallah). His followers had already taken control of the Sistan region, which had been devastated by Arab military campaigns. Although the ideas of the Kharijites had entered Sistan during the Arab conquests, the atrocities committed by adherents of this sect in Khurasan and the eastern regions had not diminished even by the mid-8th century. Indeed, even since the time of Qatari ibn al-Fuja'a, the Kharijites had remained an important factor in the political life of Sistan, Kirman, and eastern Khurasan [5].

By the late Umayyad period, Kharijism had weakened considerably. However, despite the undeniable appeal of its early ideas, it did not receive widespread support among the Arabs living within the Caliphate, even among the Bedouins. Nevertheless, the developments in Sistan indicate that although this doctrine was introduced by the Arabs, it found significant support among the local Iranian population as well. Hamza ibn Azarak himself was of purely Iranian origin. The work *Tarikh-i Sistan* explicitly states that the majority of the population of Sistan accepted Kharijism brought by the Arabs [6].

Thus, in the region of Sistan, Kharijite doctrine adapted to the religious and political transformations of the early period of the Arab Caliphate and acquired a new form. This process became closely linked with local conditions, particularly with social discontent directed against heavy and unjust taxation. As a result of



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this successful adaptation, Sistan became the only major region where Kharijite traditions were preserved to a certain extent during the early Abbasid period.

It is likely that this unique environment led to the emergence of the Hamziya movement. Its followers were considered a distinct branch of Kharijism, closely associated with the Ajarida faction. Some sources confirm the existence of the Hamziyya as a separate sect. Information about their views and activities can be found in the works of scholars such as al-Ash'ari, al-Baghdadi, and al-Shahrastani.

In the early stages of Umayyad rule, Kharijism in Iranian territories was primarily associated with the Azariqa branch. The main characteristic of this faction was its strict and uncompromising doctrines developed by its founder, Nafi' ibn al-Azraq. It is known that the Arabs had long-standing contacts with Persia through the Persian Gulf—relations between Oman and Bahrain with the coasts of Fars, Kirman, and Makran had always been close. Therefore, the spread of these doctrines into Persian territories was a natural process.

Atiyya ibn al-Aswad al-Hanafi had been one of the supporters of Najda in Arabia but refused to recognize Abu Fudayk 'Abdallah ibn Sawrani, who was declared Najda's successor [7]. As a result, he and his followers became known as the 'Ataviyya and moved to the regions of Kirman and Sistan. Eventually, the 'Ataviyya were defeated by 'Abbad ibn al-Muhallab, son of al-Muhallab ibn Abi Sufra, who belonged to the Sufriyya branch. After this, the 'Ataviyya became the dominant Kharijite faction among those who had taken refuge in Sistan [8].

Additionally, 'Atiyya, the founder of the 'Ajarida branch, was also a follower of 'Abdulkarim ibn 'Ajrada. 'Ajrada is reported to have been from Balkh, although some sources suggest that he may have originated either from Balkh or Kufa. He was arrested by Khalid ibn 'Abdallah al-Qasri, the governor of Iraq and Khurasan, and was killed in prison. His disciples fled toward the region of Fars, where the teachings of the 'Ajarida subsequently spread [9].

The followers of the 'Ajarida held a more moderate position compared to the more radical doctrines of other Kharijite groups. In particular, they differed from other Kharijites on the issue of the status of the children of unbelievers. According to their view, the children of unbelievers are considered neither believers nor unbelievers until they reach maturity and consciously reject Islam [10].



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According to al-Ash‘ari and al-Baghdadi, several sub-branches of the ‘Ajarida existed among the Kharijites of Sistan. Al-Baghdadi writes that the dominant faction among them was the Hazimiyya, which promoted a deterministic doctrine similar to the Sunni concept of qadar (predestination). According to this view, God has predetermined all human actions—both good and evil.

However, al-Baghdadi notes that Hamza ibn Azarak did not accept this doctrine. Instead, he advanced another teaching referred to as “Hamza al-Khariji al-Qadari.” This corresponds with the accounts of al-Ash‘ari and al-Shahrastani, who state that Hamza supported views close to those of the Maymuniyya, another branch of the ‘Ajarida. The Maymuniyya, being closer to Mu‘tazilite doctrine, held that humans create their own actions [11].

Hamza’s views thus differed from those of the Hazimiyya. Another group, known as the Khalafiyya, supported deterministic ideas similar to the Hazimiyya. According to al-Shahrastani, the Khalafiyya were predominant among the Kharijites in the regions of Kirman and Makran [12].

Another important feature of the Hamziyya movement was their stance toward individuals who did not participate in rebellion or opposition against the ruling authority. They considered such individuals to still be Muslims. According to al-Ash‘ari, Hamza emphasized the necessity of fighting against the ruler (sultan) and his supporters. However, according to their doctrine, those who neither fought against the ruler nor supported him were still regarded as Muslims. Al-Baghdadi also notes that Hamza permitted alliances with other Kharijite groups, although these groups did not actively participate in military engagements [13]. Although Hamza did not consider those who refrained from joining his struggle as unbelievers, in practice his followers persecuted members of other Kharijite groups with the same brutality they directed against non-Kharijites. In particular, they carried out attacks against the Bayhasiyya, Hazimiyya, and Sa‘labiyya factions.

One of the most significant issues among the Kharijites was the question of children—whether they should be considered to share the same faith as their parents. This issue was especially important for the more radical factions. The ‘Ajarida branch diverged from the Bayhasiyya on this matter and, as a branch of the Najdat movement, advocated relatively more moderate views. However, the



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Hamziyya differed from the 'Ajarida in several respects and, in particular, moved away from the doctrines of the Maymuniyya. The Maymuniyya rejected the idea that children automatically follow the faith of their parents.

In contrast, the followers of Hamza believed that children follow the religion of their parents. Therefore, if the parents were considered unbelievers, their children were deemed condemned to Hell from birth and could be killed. This doctrine is also consistent with events related to Hamza's activities in the Bayhaq region. Historical sources recount a conflict between Hamza and Tahir ibn al-Husayn al-Yamani. Hamza seized the area around Pushang and ordered the killing of children. In this episode, it is reported that his followers executed not only adults but also young children.

According to historical accounts, the followers of the Hamziyya also massacred individuals who did not actively participate in military actions. Men and women were gathered separately and executed; some were tied to tree branches, and their bodies were dismembered [14]. Thus, the conflict between Hamza's forces and government troops became increasingly brutal. This further complicated the ability of the caliphal deputies to establish control over the Kharijites.

The question of whether Kharijism in Sistan constituted a popular movement remains controversial. Although its connection with local discontent is evident, it is difficult to classify it entirely as a mass popular movement. Some scholars (such as Sharsiya and others) have argued that Kharijism was essentially a popular movement. However, the strict asceticism of the Kharijites, their political views, and their harsh practices in Khurasan and Sistan hindered their widespread acceptance among broader segments of the local population.

One of the most radical political slogans of the Kharijites was the struggle against those who did not adhere to their doctrine. For this reason, the practice of isti'rād (mass killing) was regularly applied against individuals who disagreed with Hamza's followers. According to al-Baghdadi, Hamza's actions in the regions of Herat and Pushang were directly linked to this policy. His forces systematically executed prisoners captured in battles.

In the early period, Kharijite uprisings in Sistan constituted only one strand among various movements of unrest and resistance. It is necessary to consider other factors that shaped the 150-year period of Sistan's history following the



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Arab conquest. First, the region's strategic position as a frontier zone made it a base for ghazis (holy warriors) and volunteer fighters engaged in campaigns against neighboring non-Muslim regions such as Ghur and Zamindavar. The activities of these military leaders were sometimes so uncontrolled that they even posed a threat to the Muslim population of Sistan, acting almost like bandits.

Moreover, Sistan was relatively isolated due to the surrounding desert regions, and there was persistent dissatisfaction among the local population toward Arab governors and officials. These officials were usually appointed from Khurasan or even from distant Baghdad. They were frequently replaced with each change of government, which often encouraged them to pursue personal gain. In that period, administrative appointments were often perceived as opportunities to accumulate wealth from the province as quickly as possible.

The abuse of power by governors, as well as the plundering activities of oppressive tax collectors ('ummāl), played a crucial role in generating local protest movements and significantly contributed to many Kharijite uprisings. For example, the famous uprising of Hamza ibn 'Abdallah al-Sijistani was closely linked to such factors: the killing of an unjust tax collector and the massacres carried out by Hamza's supporters in Khurasan.

According to Bogdan Skaldek, the primary cause of the uprising led by Hamza ibn 'Abdallah al-Sijistani was economic in nature. He identifies the oppression under the governors during the time of Ma'n ibn Za'ida, as well as the severe financial conditions in Sistan and al-Musayyab during the administrations of Zubayr ibn Bakkar and 'Ali ibn 'Isa, as the main causes. According to him, these conditions gave rise to negative, even anarchic, protest movements directed against economic pressures.

The social groups most affected by heavy taxation were peasants and small landowners, who formed the main support base of the Kharijite groups. The doctrine of Kharijism alone cannot fully explain the emergence of these uprisings. Nevertheless, Skaldek's interpretation contains an element of truth. However, the causes of the uprisings were not limited to economic factors alone. They were also strongly connected to the political situation within the Abbasid Caliphate, as well as to changes in government [15].



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Thus, the unrest in the region of Sistan resulted from the interaction of various factors—economic, political, and social—which later laid the groundwork for historical developments associated with the activities of the renowned commander Ya‘qub ibn al-Layth.

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