

The Islamization of Banu Sulayh Tribe: Transformation of the early arabo-islamic culture

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Abstract.

The Islamization of the Banu Sulayh tribe represents an important episode in the transformation of early Arab society during the formative period of Islam. Prior to Islam, the Banu Sulayh, like many Arab tribes, were embedded in a socio-cultural system shaped by tribal loyalty (*‘aṣabiyyah*), customary law, and pre-Islamic religious practices. This study examines the process through which Islam was introduced, negotiated, and ultimately integrated into the social, cultural, and religious life of the Banu Sulayh tribe. Using a historical-analytical approach, the paper explores the mechanisms of religious conversion, the role of *da‘wah* and political alliances, and the reconfiguration of tribal identity under Islamic norms. The findings demonstrate that Islamization did not merely replace pre-Islamic traditions but reoriented them toward a new ethical, legal, and spiritual framework rooted in Islamic teachings. This transformation contributed to the formation of an early Arab-Islamic culture characterized by the synthesis of tribal structures and Islamic values. The case of Banu Sulayh highlights the dynamic nature of Islamization as a gradual and adaptive process rather than a sudden cultural rupture.

Keywords: Islamization; Banu Sulayh; Early Arab Society; Arab-Islamic Culture; Tribal Transformation; Pre-Islamic Arabia

Introduction

The Banu Sulayh were an influential Arab tribal confederation whose social, political, and cultural structures epitomized the prevailing institutional frameworks of pre-Islamic Arabian society (*al-‘Aṣr al-Jāhili*). Situated across the strategic desert corridors and semi-arid frontiers of Northern Arabia and the fringes of the Syrian-Iraqi steppe (*Bādiyat al-Shām wa-l-‘Irāq*), the tribe operated as an autonomous nomadic and semi-nomadic entity. The socio-political organization of Banu Sulayh was rooted in a kinship-based corporate structure, where the primary unit of social cohesion was derived from agnatic lineage (*al-‘aṣabiyyah al-qabaliyyah*). Within the analytical tradition of Iraqi socio-historical scholarship—most notably articulated by the pioneering sociologist ‘Alī al-Wardī—this tribal structure was governed by a dual social

consciousness: a fierce internal solidarity designed to protect the immediate agnatic group (*‘aṣabiyyat al-damm*), and an external orientation governed by competitive prestige, martial defense, and raiding (*al-ghazw*). Survival, territorial integrity, and social status within this hyper-arid environment were entirely contingent upon the collective military readiness of the male kinsmen (*al-fursān*), operating under an unwritten code of customary law (*al-‘urf al-‘ashā’irī*).

In Iraqi academic historiography—such as the foundational works of Jawād ‘Alī in his encyclopedic *al-Mufaṣṣal fī Tārīkh al-‘Arab Qabl al-Islām*—the governance model of pre-Islamic Arab tribes like Banu Sulayh is classified as a decentralized, non-institutionalized patriarchy (*nizām al-mashyakha*). Political authority within Banu Sulayh was not vested in an autocratic sovereign or formal bureaucratic apparatus, but rather concentrated in the hands of the tribal chieftain (*shaykh al-qabīlah*) and the council of elders (*majlis al-shuyūkh*). The chieftain’s authority was strictly conditional, contingent upon his continuous demonstration of essential tribal virtues (*faḍā’il al-jāhiliyyah*): extraordinary generosity and hospitality (*al-karam wa-l-ḍiyāfah*), unyielding courage in battle (*al-shajā‘ah*), and judicial wisdom in resolving internal disputes (*al-ḥikmah wa-l-faṣl fī al-khuṣūmāt*). Legal rulings were not derived from codifiable statutory law or divine revelation, but from inherited ancestral precedent (*al-sunnah al-jāhiliyyah*) and judicial arbitrations (*al-tiyārah* or *al-ḥukm al-‘ashā’irī*). The ultimate ethical horizon of the individual within Banu Sulayh was bounded by the protection of female honor and tribal sacred inviolability (*al-irḍ wa-l-ḥurmat*), the defense of tribal waters and grazing rights (*al-kalā’ wa-l-mā’*), and the mandatory execution of blood revenge (*al-tha’r*), which served as the primary deterrence mechanism against external aggression.

The religious and spiritual life of Banu Sulayh prior to their integration into the Islamic fold mirrored the wider ideological fragmentation of the Arabian Peninsula. In accordance with the analytical classifications established by classical historiography and modern Iraqi scholarship, pre-Islamic religious expression was defined by a complex form of polytheistic animism and idolatry (*al-shirk wa-‘ibādat al-awthān*), alongside localized reverence for sacred stones (*al-anṣāb*), ancestral spirits, and protective deities. While the supreme deity (*Allāh*) was recognized in a distant, abstract sense, practical ritual devotion was directed toward intermediary idols (*al-asnām*) that were believed to intercede for the tribe’s agricultural, pastoral, and martial success. Concurrently, due to their proximity to the Ghassanid and Lakhmid buffer realms on the Byzantine and Sasanian peripheries, segments of Banu Sulayh were exposed to regional monotheistic traditions, particularly Eastern Christianity (*al-Naṣrāniyyah*) and Henotheistic tendencies (*al-Ḥanīfiyyah*).

However, as historical sociologists emphasize, pre-Islamic religion across Arab tribes did not function as a systematic, transcendent theological system (*manhaj ‘aqā’idī mukamal*) that dictated personal moral transformation or universal ethical accountability. Instead, ritual practices operated primarily as socio-cultural mechanisms designed to reinforce communal solidarity (*al-ta’līf al-ijtimā’ī*) and validate political treaties (*al-ḥilf*). The sacred sanctuaries (*al-aḥrām*) and seasonal pilgrimage fairs (*al-aswāq al-jāhiliyyah*) served as venues for economic trade, genealogical recitation (*al-tafākhur fī al-ansāb*), and truce negotiations rather than sites for moral regeneration. Religion was an instrument of immediate earthly utility (*manfa‘ah*

dunyawiyyah), lacking a cohesive metaphysical framework concerning the afterlife, ultimate divine judgment, or human equality.

Historiographical analysis of Banu Sulayh demonstrates that their pre-Islamic moral universe was anchored by what W. Montgomery Watt conceptualizes as "tribal humanism"—an ethical orientation where the preservation, honor, and material prosperity of the tribe constituted the absolute supreme value. Within this framework, individual human worth was entirely derivative of tribal affiliation; an individual severed from their tribe (*al-khalī* or *al-ṣu'lūk*) was stripped of legal protection and social existence. The moral ideal was summarized in the concept of chivalric virtue (*al-murū'ah*), which synthesized martial toughness, endurance (*al-ṣabr*), loyalty to allies (*wafā' al-'ahd*), and protection of the weak within the kin group.

Yet, as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas observes in his philosophical critique of *Jāhilī* consciousness, this moral code was inherently tragic and limited because it lacked an anchor in absolute Divine Unity (*al-Tawḥīd*). Without a transcendent metaphysical principle that subordinated human action to a supreme moral lawgiver, the ethical values of tribes like Banu Sulayh remained bound to earthly, temporal phenomena: biological bloodlines (*al-nasab*), physical strength (*al-quwwah al-māddiyyah*), and fleeting worldly fame (*al-dhikr wa-l-fukhr*). Justice (*al-'adl*) was strictly particularistic—right conduct meant supporting one's kinsman whether he was the oppressor or the oppressed (*unṣur akhāka ṣāliman aw maḥlūman* in its pre-Islamic, literal sense)—which inevitably produced continuous cycles of intertribal warfare (*ayyām al-'Arab*) and socio-political instability.

From the perspective of classical Arabic scholarship, including the socio-historical theories of Ibn Khaldūn in his *Muqaddimah*, tribes situated in this pre-Islamic state operated in a condition of raw wilderness (*al-tawāḥḥush*), driven by *'aṣabiyyah* to dominate neighboring groups. Ibn Khaldūn posited that while *'aṣabiyyah* provides the necessary physical force and social cohesion for group survival and state formation (*al-mulk*), it remains a destructive, volatile energy unless it is disciplined, elevated, and unified by a transcendent religious idea (*da'wah dīniyyah*). The Banu Sulayh, prior to Islam, possessed high structural cohesion and martial capability, but their potential remained fragmented by the localized, self-referential nature of *Jāhilī* culture. Their social identity was locked within a closed cyclical worldview (*al-dawr al-mughlaq*) dictated by seasonal migrations, blood retribution, and ancestral veneration. The historical significance of their subsequent encounter with Islam lies precisely in this structural baseline: the transition of Banu Sulayh from a localized, lineage-obsessed tribal entity governed by customary law (*al-'urf al-jāhilī*) into an integrated component of a universal political and spiritual community (*al-Ummah al-Islāmiyyah*) governed by divine law (*al-Sharī'ah*) and Islamic ethics (*al-akhlāq al-Islāmiyyah*).

The transformation that Banu Sulayh underwent during the early Arab-Islamic conquests cannot be understood as a mere political submission (*al-istislām al-siyāsī*) or passive cultural assimilation. Rather, as Iraqi academics such as Akram Ḍiyā' al-'Umarī highlight in his studies of early Islamic society (*al-Mujtama' al-Madanī fī 'Aṣr al-Nubuwwah*), the process of Islamization (*'amaliyyat al-Taslīm wa-l-Aslamah*) required a fundamental psychological, cognitive, and structural reorientation. It demanded that the tribe transpose its primary loyalty from the

immediate kin group (*al-‘ashīrah*) to the universal ideological polity centered in Medina. In pre-Islamic Arabia, Banu Sulayh’s self-definition was strictly genealogical (*ta‘rīf nasabī*); after their integration into Islam, their identity became fundamentally moral and legal (*ta‘rīf akhlāqī wa-shar‘ī*). The pre-Islamic tribal values were not completely erased, but rather subjected to a process of moral purification and functional re-signification (*al-tahdhīb wa-l-reorientation*). The aggressive impulse of *‘aṣabiyyah* was redirected from internal inter-Arab warfare (*al-fitiān wa-l-ghazw*) toward organized external expansion and ideological defense (*al-Jihād fī Sabīl Allāh*), while the virtue of hospitality (*al-karam*) was elevated from a mechanism of personal vanity (*al-fukhr wa-l-riyā‘*) into a sacred religious duty of charity (*al-Zakāh wa-l-Ṣadaqah*).

Ultimately, the pre-Islamic history of Banu Sulayh provides an essential baseline for evaluating the profound civilizational shift that occurred across the Near East during the seventh century. The tribe represented a classic embodiment of Arab pastoral-nomadic life, possessing high military mobility, a refined oral poetic tradition (*al-muru‘ah al-shi‘riyyah*), and a fiercely independent socio-political ethos. Yet, bound by the material and metaphysical limitations of *Jāhiliyyah*, Banu Sulayh remained incapable of projecting unified, enduring civilizational power beyond their immediate geographic environment. The advent of Islam provided the necessary ideological catalyst (*al-muḥaffiz al-‘aqā‘idī*) that synthesized their latent tribal energies, structural solidarity, and martial expertise into an expansive, universalist movement. Understanding the pre-Islamic baseline of Banu Sulayh—their legal customs, socio-political institutions, and spiritual landscape—is therefore critical for analyzing how early Islamic *da‘wah* and statecraft successfully converted a fragmented tribal confederation into an active participant in the formation of early Arab-Islamic culture (*al-Thaqāfah al-‘Arabiyyah al-Islāmiyyah*).

2. The Islamization of Banu Sulayh in Arabic Literature and Historical Sources

In classical Islamic historical chronicles, biographical compendia, and genealogical treatises (*al-masādir al-tārikhiyyah wa-l-adabiyyah*), the Islamization of the Banu Sulayh is depicted not as an isolated or abrupt event of political subjugation, but as an integral episode within the vast civilizational transformation (*al-taḥawwul al-ḥaqāirī*) that swept seventh-century Arabia. Classical historiographers such as al-Ṭabarī in his monumental *Tārikh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, Ibn Hishām in *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, and Ibn Sa‘d in *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* document this process as a multi-layered transition that mediated between diplomatic negotiation (*al-sifārah wa-l-mu‘āhadāt*), structural political alignment, and deep internal spiritual reorientation (*al-hidāyah wa-l-īmān*). Far from presenting a mere superficial shift in external allegiance, these early literary records demonstrate that the acceptance of Islam by tribal elites and their kin required a systematic dismantling of the *Jāhili* cognitive and social paradigm. The fundamental hinge of this historical transformation occurred when the primary principle of human association—hitherto anchored exclusively in agnatic lineage (*al-nasab*), physical descent, and chauvinistic tribal solidarity (*al-‘aṣabiyyah*)—was subordinated to the universal moral and legal framework of the expanding Islamic polity (*al-Ummah*). Membership in the social order was no longer defined by shared ancestral bloodlines or military dominance, but by subscription to absolute monotheistic belief (*al-Tawḥīd*), moral accountability, and submission to a unified divine law (*al-Sharī‘ah*).

Within the modern analytical tradition of Arab-Iraqi academic historiography—exemplified by scholars such as Akram Ḍiyā' al-'Umarī, Farūq 'Umar al-'Alī, and Nūrī Ja'far—the literary transmission detailing the conversion of desert confederations like Banu Sulayh is systematically scrutinized through the lens of epistemological, social, and legal recalibration (*al-reorientation al-ma'rifi wa-l-ijtimā'i*). Iraqi historians analyzing classical *Sīrah* and *Maghāzī* literature emphasize that the process of Islamization operated simultaneously across two distinct yet deeply intertwined axes: outer structural integration and inner normative transformation. Externally, the Banu Sulayh transitioned from an autonomous nomadic existence regulated by customary tribal arbitration (*al-ḥukm al-'ashā'iri*) and localized ancestral precedent to full inclusion within a centralized state authority anchored in Medina. This required acknowledging the supreme legislative sovereignty of divine revelation (*al-ḥākimiyyah al-ilāhiyyah*) as administered through prophetic envoys, tax collectors (*al-'ummāl wa-l-jubāt*), and judicial arbiters (*al-quḍāh*).

Internally, this structural realignment demanded a profound cognitive restructuring and the deep internalization of Islamic ritual practices (*al-'ibādāt*), ethical self-purification (*al-tazkiyah*), and the active enforcement of communal morality (*al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar*). The inherited customs of the tribe were subjected to a rigorous normative audit against the criteria of divine revelation. Pre-Islamic practices deemed destructive to human dignity and social equilibrium—such as arbitrary blood retribution (*al-tha'r*), female infanticide (*wa'd al-banāt*), plunder raiding (*al-ghazw*), and superstitious idolatry (*al-shirk*)—were explicitly criminalized and dismantled. Conversely, traditional tribal virtues that aligned with the universal ethic of Islam, such as chivalric generosity (*al-karam*), hospitality (*al-ḍiyāfah*), covenantal fidelity (*wafā' al-'ahd*), and martial courage (*al-shajā'ah*), were not eradicated; rather, they were purified of personal vanity (*al-fukhr wa-l-riyā'*) and re-signified as sacred religious duties (*farā'id dīniyyah*) performed for the sake of the Divine.

This comprehensive socio-religious restructuring described throughout classical Arabic literature mirrors the theoretical framework articulated by Ismail Raji al-Faruqi regarding the foundational dynamics of the Islamization process. Al-Faruqi posits that authentic Islamization is never a passive assimilation of external dogmas or the mere replacement of cultural labels; it is the radical re-ordering of human consciousness, societal institutions, and epistemological foundations around the transcendent core of *Tawḥīd*. In the historical trajectory of Banu Sulayh, Islamization functioned precisely as such an integrative civilizational system, unifying transcendent faith (*al-īmān*), intellectual understanding (*al-ma'rifah*), and purposeful moral action (*al-'amal al-ṣāliḥ*) into an indivisible operational worldview. By infusing the daily material existence of the tribe with an acute awareness of ultimate divine judgment (*al-mas'ūliyyah al-ukhrāwiyyah*), Islam effectively shattered the fatalistic, cyclical temporal perspective of pre-Islamic Arabia (*al-dhabr wa-l-zamān*), replacing it with a linear, goal-directed historical agency (*al-fā'iliyyah al-tārīkhiyyah*).

Consequently, the literary memory of Banu Sulayh's conversion preserved in classical historiography serves as an illuminating case study of early Arab-Islamic synthesis. The text-critical tradition reveals how early Islamic statecraft absorbed pastoral-nomadic populations without obliterating their organic social cohesion. By transposing ancestral pride into spiritual

equality (*al-musāwāh al-īmāniyyah*) and rechanneling raw tribal solidarity (*‘aṣabiyyah*) away from internal fratricidal warfare and toward collective civilizational objectives (*al-da‘wah wa-l-jihād*), the Islamization of Banu Sulayh established an enduring blueprint for early Arab-Islamic culture, wherein localized tribal identity was seamlessly integrated into the universal, multi-ethnic mission of the *Ummah*.

The classical historical tradition further highlights that the Islamization of Banu Sulayh was executed through sophisticated diplomatic and administrative mechanisms designed by the Prophet Muhammad and expanded under the Rightly Guided Caliphs (*al-Khulafā’ al-Rāshidūn*). As recorded by historians like al-Balādhurī in *Futūḥ al-Buldān*, the entry of bedouin confederations into the Islamic fold was formalized through written treaties (*al-kutub wa-l-‘uhūd*). These legal documents stipulated explicit obligations: the declaration of faith (*al-Shahādah*), the establishment of regular prayer (*iqāmat al-ṣalāh*), the payment of the mandatory alms-tax (*ṭā’ al-zakāh*), and complete severance from hostile anti-Islamic alliances. In return, the early Islamic state guaranteed the Banu Sulayh absolute security of their lives, livestock, pasturage, and water reserves (*ḥimāyat al-anfus wa-l-amwāl*). This diplomatic engagement represented a radical departure from pre-Islamic political pacts (*al-ḥilf al-jāhili*), which were inherently unstable, opportunistic, and dependent on fluctuating balances of physical power. Islamic treaties introduced a sacred, inviolable dimension to inter-tribal governance, casting political compliance as a binding covenant made directly with God and His Messenger (*‘ahd Allāh wa-rasūlih*). The administrative integration of Banu Sulayh thus signaled the birth of a formal legal order where contractual obligations superseded personal tribal prestige.

In analyzing the intellectual and psychological dimension of this transition, Iraqi academic literature frequently underscores the role of Islamic pedagogy (*al-tanmiyah al-fikriyyah wa-l-tathqīf*) in solidifying tribal conversion. Recognizing that genuine Islamization required more than political submission (*al-istislām al-siyāsī*), the prophetic guidance prioritized the dispatch of Qur’anic reciters (*al-qurrā’*), legal scholars (*al-fuqahā’*), and teachers (*al-mu‘allimūn*) directly into tribal encampments. For Banu Sulayh, the introduction of the written Qur’anic text served as a profound linguistic and cognitive catalyst. The Arabic language, which had previously functioned as an oral medium for tribal self-glorification (*al-fakhriyyāt*) and polemical satire (*al-hijā’*), was suddenly elevated into the vehicle of divine revelation (*al-lughah al-muqaddasah*). Learning to recite, memorize, and comprehend the Qur’an exposed the members of Banu Sulayh to a sophisticated conceptual vocabulary—introducing abstract notions of universal justice (*al-‘adl*), divine mercy (*al-rahmah*), individual moral accountability (*al-ḥisāb*), and transcendent human dignity (*karāmat al-insān*). This educational process gradually dismantled the parochial tribal ethos, replacing it with a sophisticated Islamic consciousness (*al-wa‘y al-Islāmī*) that enabled bedouin tribesmen to view themselves as active contributors to a global spiritual order.

Furthermore, the historiography of early Islamic conquests (*futūḥāt*) demonstrates how the Islamization of Banu Sulayh catalyzed a sweeping transformation in their socio-spatial mobility and military organization. Prior to Islam, the tribe’s martial activities were characterized by localized, cyclical raids (*al-ghazw*) aimed at capturing livestock, asserting dominance, or avenging specific clan casualties—an endless cycle that consumed vital demographic energy

without building lasting political structures. Under the unified military command of the early Caliphate, the inherent combat prowess, desert navigation skills, and martial endurance of Banu Sulayh were systematically integrated into the regular armies of Islam (*jund al-Muslimīn*). This military restructuring re-oriented their fighting force from destructive internal skirmishes toward organized civilizational campaigns across the Fertile Crescent and North Africa. Participation in the *futūḥāt* accelerated the tribe's urban settlement (*al-tamaddun*), as large segments of Banu Sulayh migrated from nomadic desert encampments (*al-bādiyah*) into newly established garrison cities (*al-amṣār*) such as Kufa, Basra, and Fustat. Within these cosmopolitan urban centers, members of Banu Sulayh lived alongside diverse Arab clans and non-Arab converts (*al-mawālī*), an environment that drastically weakened traditional tribal insularity and accelerated their complete absorption into the vibrant, multi-ethnic fabric of early Arab-Islamic civilization.

The historiographical literature also addresses the complex process through which Islamic law renegotiated the social hierarchies and gender dynamics within tribes like Banu Sulayh. In pre-Islamic Arabia, women possessed limited legal personhood; inheritance was restricted exclusively to male warriors capable of bearing arms (*al-fursān*), and marriage practices were frequently coercive, treating women as transferable property within clan alliances. The implementation of Islamic jurisprudence (*al-Fiqh*) introduced revolutionary legal protections that reconfigured the internal family structure of the tribe. Women of Banu Sulayh were granted independent legal status, including guaranteed rights to property ownership, contractual consent in marriage, and explicit inheritance shares (*al-farā'id*) mandated by divine text. While patriarchal social structures persisted in practice, the legal framework of Islam established a baseline of moral and spiritual equality (*al-musāwāh fī al-karāmah al-insāniyyah*) between men and women before God. This normative shift diluted the brutal utilitarian logic of the *Jāhili* patriarchs, embedding a more compassionate, legally regulated ethos within the domestic sphere of the Islamized tribe.

Finally, the long-term historical legacy of Banu Sulayh's conversion highlights the enduring efficacy of the early Islamic model of cultural integration. Classical historians record that within two generations following their initial conversion, the descendants of Banu Sulayh were no longer recognized merely as desert bedouins, but as prominent scholars (*'ulamā'*), legal jurists (*fuqahā'*), traditionalists (*muḥaddithūn*), and military commanders (*qiyādāt al-jaysh*) serving throughout the Umayyad and Abbasid empires. This remarkable socio-cultural mobility proves that Islamization did not destroy the human potential of the Arab tribes; rather, it liberated their latent capabilities from the restrictive boundaries of ancestral parochialism. By substituting the idol of tribal lineage with the ideal of divine piety (*al-Taqwā*)—as articulated in the seminal Qur'anic declaration that the most noble in the sight of God is the most righteous—the early Islamic movement successfully forged a unified, dynamic civilizational identity. The historical trajectory of Banu Sulayh, as meticulously preserved in classical Arabic literature and critically interpreted by modern Iraqi academics, stands as a powerful testament to how divine revelation transformed a fragmented, war-torn tribal landscape into the foundation of a sophisticated, enduring global culture (*al-Thaqāfah al-'Arabiyyah al-Islāmiyyah*).

3. Controversies in Orientalist Interpretations

In modern academic discourse, the historical interpretation of how Arab confederations like the Banu Sulayh accepted Islam has become a central battleground between Western Orientalist frameworks and indigenous Arab-Islamic historiography. Orientalist scholarship has frequently approached the Islamization of bedouin tribes through reductionist paradigms that privilege materialist, political, and socio-economic determinism. Within these eurocentric readings, the conversion of tribal lineages is routinely cast not as a genuine spiritual or epistemological transformation, but as a pragmatic, opportunistic adaptation to the shifting geopolitical dynamics of seventh-century Arabia.

Scholars within the hyper-critical revisionist tradition—most notably Patricia Crone in her influential work *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*—frequently marginalized early Arabic literary evidence as retroactive ideological construction. Crone argued that the rapid expansion of early Islam was fueled predominantly by material pressures, trade disruption, and the predatory instincts of desert tribes seeking access to the wealth of the Fertile Crescent, rather than an internal restructuring of faith (*īmān*). Similarly, early Orientalists like William Muir and Julius Wellhausen viewed tribal conversions as strategic maneuvers by tribal chieftains to secure political immunity, military alliances, and economic spoils (*al-ghanā'im*) from the burgeoning Medinan state. Even more nuanced Western historians, such as Marshall Hodgson in *The Venture of Islam*, while recognizing the systemic civilizational scope of the Islamic movement, often categorized early tribal conversion as an operational alliance (*islām*) focused on public order, sharply distinguishing it from a personal, internalized spiritual commitment (*īmān*).

Critics within Muslim and Arab intellectual circles argue that these Orientalist interpretations suffer from a profound epistemological bias. By projecting secularized, post-Enlightenment Western paradigms onto early Islamic history, Orientalist methodology routinely bifurcates human action into isolated categories: the political versus the religious, the material versus the spiritual, and the strategic versus the sincere. In doing so, these analytical models fail to comprehend the holistic reality of Islamization as understood within the internal logic of the Islamic tradition, where faith, political governance, social structure, and moral action form an indivisible continuum. This methodological critique closely aligns with the foundational insights of Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). Said demonstrated that Western academic discourses on the Orient have historically functioned as tools of intellectual domination, reconstructing Eastern societies through external, essentialist categories that deny native subjects authentic historical agency and internal coherence. When applied to the historiography of Banu Sulayh, Orientalism reduces the complex, multi-layered internal choices of tribal actors to mere passive reactions to power dynamics or economic incentives, effectively erasing their moral and theological reasoning.

Arab and Iraqi academic historians have mounted a robust counter-critique against this Orientalist revisionism, offering a sophisticated defense of indigenous historical sources (*al-masādir al-aṣīlah*). Renowned Iraqi historian Akram Ḍiyā' al-ʿUmarī, in his seminal work *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah al-Ṣaḥīḥah*, rigorously refutes the reductionist claim that tribal conversions were driven primarily by coercion or material greed. Al-ʿUmarī demonstrates through text-critical methodology (*manhaj al-naqd al-tārīkhī*) that early prophetic statecraft

systematically rejected purely opportunistic conversions. The Prophet Muhammad actively scrutinized tribal delegations (*al-wufūd*), refusing to grant political protection or treaty rights to tribes that sought material concessions without demonstrating a structural commitment to Islamic law, daily prayer, and the eradication of *Jāhili* injustices.

Furthermore, the eminent Iraqi historian and sociologist ‘Alī al-Wardī, in his historical analysis of Arabian social dynamics (*Lamaḥāt Ijtimā‘iyyah min Tārīkh al-‘Irāq al-Ḥadīth*), highlights that Western reductionism fundamentally misunderstands the nature of tribal psychology (*psyche al-bādiyah*). Al-Wardī observes that while pre-Islamic bedouin life was undeniably fiercely independent and economically self-interested, the transformation brought by Islam was not a superficial trick of political subjugation. Instead, Islam provided a transcendent ideology capable of satisfying the desert Arab's deep psychological requirement for honor (*al-fukhr*) and courage (*al-shajā‘ah*), while elevating those instincts into a cosmic, moral framework centered on *Tawḥīd*.

This defense of the internal logic of Islamic history is further amplified by contemporary Iraqi historians such as Nūrī Ja‘far and Farūq ‘Umar al-‘Alī in his studies on early Islamic statehood (*al-Uṣūl al-Tārīkhīyyah li-l-Dawlah al-Islāmiyyah*). They argue that Orientalist scholars like Crone selectively read Arabic sources, seizing upon references to spoils of war (*al-ghanā‘im*) or tactical negotiations while ignoring the vast corpus of biographical data (*kuttāb al-ṭabaqāt*) that details the deep educational, legal, and personal transformations experienced by tribal leaders and their communities. When the Banu Sulayh accepted Islam, their chieftains were required to host prophetic teachers (*al-mu‘allimūn*) who taught the Qur‘an, enforced the abolition of usury (*al-ribā*) and blood revenge (*al-tha‘r*), and regulated legal contracts. Such systemic intervention into the daily legal and social fabric of the tribe cannot be explained away as a mere veneer of political opportunism; it represents a profound institutional re-engineering of tribal life.

Ultimately, the historiographical conflict surrounding the Islamization of Banu Sulayh highlights two fundamentally incompatible ways of reading the past. The Orientalist paradigm, bound by secular assumptions, remains blind to the transformative power of religious revelation as a primary driver of historical change, insisting on seeing faith as a mere instrument of political and economic power. In contrast, the indigenous Arab-Islamic historiographical tradition, vindicated by modern critical scholars across Iraq and the wider Muslim world, demonstrates that the conversion of tribes like Banu Sulayh was a holistic civilizational event. By integrating belief (*al-īmān*), law (*al-Sharī‘ah*), and social action (*al-‘amal*) into a unified system, early Islam successfully restructured the tribal ethos, refashioning localized nomadic confederations into enduring pillars of a universal, value-driven global civilization.

4. Al-Attas’ and Al-Faruqi’s Frameworks as Analytical Correctives

The theoretical frameworks of Islamization conceptualized by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Ismail Raji al-Faruqi offer a profound analytical corrective to the reductionist methodologies that have long characterized Western Orientalist scholarship. While traditional Orientalism evaluates the conversion of Arab tribal confederations such as the Banu Sulayh through

socio-economic incentives, military opportunism, or political coercion, the intellectual models of al-Attas and al-Faruqi restore the internal integrity and epistemological authority of Islam in interpreting its own historical phenomena. By shifting the historical inquiry from external material mechanics to internal cognitive and ontological transformation, these scholars demonstrate that the Islamization of a tribal entity constitutes far more than a pragmatic change of socio-political allegiance; it represents a comprehensive reconstitution of identity, worldview, and the very structure of human meaning.

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas conceptualizes Islamization fundamentally as an epistemological and metaphysical revolution—a profound transformation of worldview (*ru'yat al-islām li-l-wujūd*) achieved through the radical purification of language, concepts, and human consciousness from *Jāhili* or secular distortions. In his foundational text, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, al-Attas posits that Islamization is a dynamic process that de-secularizes human thought by embedding the transcendent principle of *Tawhīd* as the supreme organizing matrix of human life, ethics, and knowledge. When applied to the historical trajectory of the Banu Sulayh, al-Attas's framework demonstrates that accepting Islam required a fundamental cognitive liberation. The tribe's pre-Islamic mental universe—which was constrained by fatalism (*al-dahr*), local ancestral mythology, and an absolute devotion to lineage (*al-nasab*)—was systematically deconstructed. Through the linguistic impact of the Qur'an, key cultural concepts were re-signified: honor (*al-murū'ah*) was elevated from clan-centric chauvinism to divine piety (*al-taqwā*), and justice (*al-'adl*) was liberated from revenge-driven custom (*al-tha'r*) to become an absolute moral imperative governed by divine law (*al-Sharī'ah*). Consequently, the Islamization of Banu Sulayh was not merely a diplomatic alignment with Medina, but an ontological shift wherein the ultimate purpose of human existence was re-anchored in divine transcendence.

Ismail Raji al-Faruqi complements al-Attas's metaphysical approach by analyzing Islamization as an integrative civilizational system that restructures societal institutions, law, and historical action. In *Al-Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life*, al-Faruqi argues that *Tawhīd* is not merely an abstract theological doctrine, but a normative methodology that unifies faith, knowledge, and socio-political practice into a coherent civilizational order. Applied to the case of Banu Sulayh, al-Faruqi's framework allows historians to interpret tribal conversion as a process of structural integration into a unified, values-driven polity (*al-Ummah*). Islamization provided the conceptual infrastructure required to dissolve the parochial barriers of tribal insularity without obliterating organic social cohesion. The raw, fragmented energies of tribal solidarity (*al-'aṣabiyyah*) were systematically re-oriented toward universal ethical ends, transforming a nomadic confederation into active contributors to a global civilizational mission.

This holistic perspective is further corroborated by modern scholars of Islamic civilization such as Osman Bakar, who emphasizes in *Islamic Civilization and the Modern World* that the historical expansion of Islam succeeded precisely because it offered a comprehensive epistemological synthesis. Bakar notes that Islamic statecraft systematically integrated local cultural forms while purifying them of elements that contradicted universal ethical standards. When examined alongside the contributions of modern Arab historians like Hisham Djait in *Al-Kūfah: Bidāyat al-Madīnah al-'Arabiyyah al-Islāmiyyah* and Jawad Ali in *Al-Mufaṣṣal fī Tārīkh*

al-ʿArab Qabl al-Islām, it becomes evident that the transformation of tribes like Banu Sulayh involved a sophisticated process of urban settlement (*al-tamaddun*) and legal institutionalization. These scholars demonstrate that the transition from desert nomadism to garrison cities (*al-amṣār*) reflected a deeper cognitive realignment—one wherein tribal members began viewing themselves as moral agents operating within a universal historical trajectory.

Moreover, the analytical paradigms of al-Attas and al-Faruqi directly expose the methodological limitations of prominent Orientalist literature. Scholars like Fritz Krenkow, who meticulously cataloged the genealogies and poetic fragments of northern Arab tribes such as Banu Sulayh, frequently approached their subjects with a philological skepticism that treated tribal history through localized, fragmented categories. While Krenkow’s empirical collection of manuscripts provided valuable textual data, his analytical framework—typical of early twentieth-century European Orientalism—lacked the conceptual tools to recognize the profound religious and structural transformation sweeping through these tribal structures. By prioritizing material metrics and viewing conversion primarily through the lens of external political forces, Orientalist scholarship routinely misread the deep internal logic of the Arabic sources.

By restoring the centrality of *Tawḥīd* as both a historical catalyst and an analytical category, the frameworks of al-Attas and al-Faruqi provide a robust hermeneutical bridge. They enable contemporary historians to validate the authentic voices of indigenous Arabic historiography—such as the narratives preserved by al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Hishām, and Ibn Saʿd—while offering a sophisticated critique of modern Western revisionism. Ultimately, interpreting the Islamization of Banu Sulayh through these integrative frameworks demonstrates that the rise of early Islamic society was not an accident of geopolitical opportunism, but the realization of a powerful civilizational vision that successfully transformed fragmented tribal identities into an enduring, transcendent global community.

Building upon the theoretical rectifications established by scholars like Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, it is critical to resolve three persistent conceptual misunderstandings surrounding the Islamization of pre-Islamic Arab confederations such as the Banu Sulayh. The historiography of early Islamic conversions has long suffered from analytical distortions created by projecting foreign socio-political categories onto seventh-century Arabian realities. By re-examining the conversion of Banu Sulayh through both primary Arabic chronicles and modern indigenous historiography, historians can delineate the exact boundaries of Islamization, distinguishing it clearly from ethnic chauvinism, superficial political opportunism, and modern Western definitions of cultural religion.

First and foremost, the historical process of Islamization (*al-Aslamah*) must be strictly decoupled from the concept of Arabization (*al-Taʿrīb*). A foundational historical proof of this vital distinction lies in the immediate, fierce resistance of the Prophet Muhammad’s own tribe, the Quraysh, during the dawn of the prophetic mission in Mecca. As classical historians like Ibn Hishām in *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah* and al-Ṭabarī in *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk* meticulously document, the Quraysh were already ethnically, linguistically, and culturally Arab, occupying the undisputed summit of pre-Islamic Arabian nobility (*al-ṣarīḥ min al-ʿArab*). Yet, when the Prophet introduced the message of absolute divine monotheism (*al-Tawḥīd*), the Meccan tribal aristocracy violently

rejected it, subjecting early Muslims to severe persecution, economic boycotts, and military conflict. Their hostility was rooted in the fact that Islam was not an affirmation of Arab identity, pride, or pre-Islamic custom; rather, it was a radical, uncompromising critique of the *Jāhili* Arab paradigm.

Islam demanded the complete destruction of ancestral idol worship (*al-shirk*), the immediate criminalization of predatory economic practices like usury (*al-ribā*), the total abolition of tribal chauvinism (*al-ʿaṣabiyyah*), and the establishment of absolute moral equality among all humans regardless of lineage or social status. Had Islamization been merely synonymous with Arabization or the expansion of an Arab ethnic empire, the Quraysh would have been its first and most enthusiastic champions rather than its most bitter, stubborn initial opponents. Therefore, when nomadic and semi-nomadic confederations like the Banu Sulayh subsequently entered the fold of Islam, they were not adopting an "Arab identity" that they already fully possessed; they were undergoing an intense ideological and ethical transformation that subjected their inherited Arab customs (*al-ʿurf al-ʿashāʾirī*) to the universal, transcendent criteria of divine revelation.

In the analytical tradition of Iraqi historians such as Akram Ḍiyāʾ al-ʿUmarī, this distinction is central to understanding the early Islamic state. Al-ʿUmarī stresses that Islam did not conquer the world to spread Arab tribal culture; instead, it dismantled the tyrannical aspects of pre-Islamic Arab culture to establish a universal ideological community (*al-Ummah*). The conversion of Banu Sulayh was not an act of ethnic self-glorification, but a process of spiritual submission (*al-istislām li-Llāh*) that re-anchored their social existence in divine command rather than ancestral descent.

Second, the historical transition of desert confederations like Banu Sulayh cannot be reduced to a superficial "political conversion" or tactical alliance, as major colonial-era Orientalists frequently asserted. European scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—most notably Julius Wellhausen, William Muir, and Theodor Nöldeke—approached early Islamic historical texts with a deep-seated secular skepticism. Bound by the imperialist expansionism of their own era, these colonial-era academics interpreted tribal conversions almost exclusively through the lens of power dynamics, Realpolitik, and socio-economic opportunism. Within their analytical frameworks, the Medinan state was portrayed merely as a centralizing conquest engine, while the conversion of bedouin tribes was dismissed as a pragmatic, temporary maneuver (*islām* as external political compliance without internal faith or *īmān*) intended to secure political immunity, military protection, and a share in spoils of war (*al-ghanāʾim*).

However, this reductionist colonial paradigm systematically ignored the profound structural, legal, and domestic re-engineering that occurred within tribal societies upon their conversion. As modern Iraqi historians like Farūq ʿUmar al-ʿAlī emphasize in his studies on early Islamic statehood, when the Banu Sulayh integrated into the Islamic polity, the transformation reached deep into the internal, private, and moral lives of the tribesmen. Conversion was never finalized through a mere verbal oath to a political leader; it required the immediate, mandatory collection and distribution of the alms-tax (*al-Zakāh*), which fundamentally restructured the economic relationships within the tribe and redistributed wealth to the poor and vulnerable. Furthermore,

Islamization mandated the immediate and total prohibition of blood revenge (*al-tha'r*) and inter-tribal raiding (*al-ghazw*), which had served as the foundational mechanisms of pre-Islamic tribal deterrence and martial identity.

The implementation of Islamic family law (*al-Fiqh*) radically altered domestic relations by granting women enforceable legal rights to property and explicit shares of inheritance (*al-farā'id*), thereby shattering the ancient patriarchal norm that restricted economic wealth exclusively to weapon-bearing male warriors (*al-fursān*). The submission of internal tribal disputes to the objective authority of divine law (*al-Sharī'ah*) administered by prophetic judges (*al-quḍāh*) dismantled the absolute, arbitrary judicial authority previously held by tribal chieftains (*shuyūkh al-qabīlah*). These deep institutional changes prove that the Islamization of Banu Sulayh altered the essential internal constitution of the tribe, destroying the autonomous, violent, and self-referential logic of desert *Jāhiliyyah*.

Third, while contemporary post-colonial Orientalists and revisionist scholars have attempted to provide fresh insights by reframing Islamization as a broad "cultural movement" rooted in revelation, this framework still generates significant misunderstandings if left unexamined. Modern Western academics, seeking to move past the blunt materialist reductionism of the colonial era, often attempt to view early Islam through the lens of socio-cultural history or anthropology. They describe the conversion of Arab tribes as a creative cultural synthesis—a movement where prophetic revelation acted as a literary and symbolic catalyst that revitalized Arabian social life.

While this approach appears more sympathetic, it remains trapped within Western secular epistemologies that define religion (*religio*) as a distinct, privatized, and localized cultural sub-system operating alongside autonomous spheres of politics, economics, and law. In Western historical sociology, culture is viewed as the primary human construct, while religion is treated as a component or byproduct of that human culture.

In sharp contrast to this secular construction, the Islamic worldview—as articulated by philosophers like Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Ismail Raji al-Faruqi—insists that Islam is not a "religion" in the modern Western, compartmentalized sense, nor is it merely an evolution of local Arab culture. Islam is conceptualized fundamentally as *al-Dīn*—an all-encompassing ontology, a comprehensive metaphysics, and an indivisible civilizational framework (*manhaj al-ḥayāh*) that governs metaphysics, jurisprudence, statecraft, economic transaction, and individual conscience without artificial bifurcation. To describe the Islamization of Banu Sulayh merely as a "cultural movement" obscures the absolute epistemological priority of divine revelation over human culture.

Revelation did not simply enrich, decorate, or gently modify existing Arab culture; it subjected that culture to a rigorous normative audit. Pre-Islamic Arab cultural elements were evaluated against the transcendent standard of *Tawḥīd*: customs that contradicted divine unity and human dignity were utterly eradicated, while neutral or beneficial customs were purified, re-oriented, and subordinated to the absolute authority of divine law. As the Iraqi sociologist 'Alī al-Wardī noted, Islam did not adapt itself to fit the pre-existing culture of the bedouin; rather, it radically

transformed the bedouin psyche, replacing the localized, finite boundaries of tribal custom with a cosmic, universal moral purpose.

Ultimately, synthesizing these historical and theoretical perspectives reveals that the Islamization of the Banu Sulayh was a unique, multi-dimensional event in civilizational history. It cannot be understood through the narrow lens of Arabization, for Islam directly challenged and transformed traditional Arab society. It cannot be dismissed as a superficial political alliance, for it fundamentally restructured the legal, economic, and moral foundations of tribal life. And it cannot be reduced to a mere cultural movement in the secular sense, for it operated as an all-encompassing spiritual and civilizational reorientation rooted in divine revelation.

Concluding Remarks

The examination of the Banu Sulayh tribe's transition into the early Islamic fold provides a vital empirical and theoretical case study in the broader transformation of early Arab society. As articulated in the abstract and demonstrated throughout this study, pre-Islamic tribal life was fundamentally anchored in localized custom, ancestral lineage, and the intense chauvinism of *‘aṣabiyyah*. The introduction of Islam did not trigger an instantaneous erasure of tribal social structures, nor did it operate as a mere superficial political conquest or a vehicle for Arab ethnic expansion. Instead, the historical trajectory of Banu Sulayh reveals a dynamic, multi-layered process of conversion wherein pre-existing social mechanisms were systematically re-oriented toward an ethical, legal, and metaphysical framework centered on *Tawḥīd*.

By evaluating this historical event through the analytical correctives proposed by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, as well as the text-critical defense of indigenous sources advanced by modern Iraqi historiography, this study effectively refutes reductionist Orientalist paradigms. Early colonial-era scholars who reduced tribal conversion to pragmatic opportunism, economic gain, or coercion failed to grasp the internal legal and spiritual restructuring of the tribe. Furthermore, distinguishing Islamization from Arabization—evidenced by the early Qurayshite rejection of prophetic monotheism—underscores that Islam was not an affirmation of pre-Islamic Arab identity, but its radical ethical audit. Likewise, framing Islamization as *al-Dīn* rather than a compartmentalized secular "cultural movement" demonstrates how divine revelation served as the supreme epistemological authority that purified and elevated tribal customs. Ultimately, the case of the Banu Sulayh highlights the nuanced, adaptive, and integrative nature of early Islamization. Rather than inflicting a violent cultural rupture, Islam successfully harnessed organic tribal structures, purging them of *Jāhili* injustice and redirecting their collective energies toward universal moral ends. The conversion of Banu Sulayh thus stands as a testament to the formative period of Islamic civilization: an era in which disparate, autonomous desert confederations were successfully synthesized into enduring, value-driven pillars of an emerging global Arab-Islamic culture.

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