

Shaykhul-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah

(rahimahullāh)

ON THE DEFINITION OF AN ‘ARAB’¹

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Ibn Taymiyyah noted that originally the name ‘Arab’ was a name for people of three kinds:

Firstly: Those whose language was Arabic.

Secondly: Those who were the children of Arabs.

Thirdly: Those who lived in the land of the Arabs which is the Arabian peninsula from the Qulzum sea,² the sea of Basra and from the farthest limit of Yemen up to where Shām begins. So Yemen is included as their land but Shām is not included. This was the land of the Arabs, at the time of the awakening and dispatch of the Arabs and before it. When Islām came and spread into large cities the Arabs remained living in these lands, from the far East to the far West and to the coasts of Shām and Armenia. These lands were the dwellings of the Persians, Romans, Berbers and others.

With regards to places and locations which are to be defined as ‘Arab countries’ then Ibn Taymiyyah provides some interesting details:

The lands divide into two:

1. Those places that were strongly affected by the Arabic language to the extent that their people do not know anything except the Arabic language. Or the people knew Arabic and ungrammatical and colloquial Arabic that had entered the Arabic

¹ From Shaykh ul-Islām Ahmad bin ‘Abdul-Haleem bin ‘Abdus-Salām Ibn Taymiyyah, edited by Dr Nāsir bin Abdil-Kareem al’Aql, *‘Iqtidā’ as-Sirāt ul-Mustaqeem li-Mukhālifa Ashāb al-Jaheem* (Riyadh: Dār Ishbilia, 1419 AH/1999 CE) pp.164-166.

Translated by ‘AbdulHaq al-Ashanti. The sub-section also contains benefits from Imām Muhammad bin Sālih al-‘Uthaymeen and Imām Muhammad Nāsirudeen al-Albānī (*rahimahumullāh*).

² This was a former name of the Red Sea.

language. Such as most of Shām, ‘Irāq, Egypt, Andalus etc and I think that Persia³ and Khurasān⁴ was like that in the past.

³ Dr. Kees Versteegh notes that in Persia, during the first three or four centuries of Islām, Middle Persian, the literary language of the Sassanid Empire disappeared. During the epoch of the Seljuk Empire, Arabic remained the language of religion and in some cases of science, but Persian was the cultural language and it remained so even when Turkish was introduced as the new language of administration. In Ottoman Turkey, the knowledge of three languages, Arabic, Persian and Turkish was part of the cultural baggage of an intellectual. This is why most Turkish loan-words from Arabic, entered via Persian. See Kees Versteegh (University of Nijmegen), “Linguistic Contacts Between Arabic and Other Languages” in *Arabica: Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, vol.4 (Leiden: Brill, Oct. 2001), p.494.

Later, some Shi’ah scholars such as the Qajar prince Jalal od-Din Mirza (d.1871 CE) made serious attempts to replace Arabic words in Farsi (Persian) with only ‘authentic’ Farsi pre-Islamic words!!?

⁴ Khurasān is a huge province in north-eastern ‘Irān stretching from ‘Irāq in the west to the borders of India in the east. Its current major cities include Naysaboar (Nishapur) and Mashhad. The Muslims took Islām there during the time of the Sahābah. The older ‘greater Khurasān’ included parts that are now in Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Four of the main historical cities of Persia are located in the older Khurasān: Nishapoor (now in Iran), Merv (now in Turkmenistan), and Herat and Balkh (now both in Afghanistan). The Mongols conquered it in 1220 C.E. and a powerful earthquake devastated the province in 1997 C.E. See:

2. The places where non-Arabs were the overwhelming majority such as the land of the Turks, Khurasān, Armenia, Azerbaijan⁵ and similar countries. These places split into: those who were Arabs from the beginning to those who were Arabs by way of residence and those who are not Arabs.

Therefore, the origins and lineages split into three kinds:



Versteegh also notes that in Khurasān, the local Persian elite remained in power after the Arab Muslims conquered it and were entrusted with the levying of taxes. As a result, Arabs probably had to learn Persian there in order to communicate. Currently, as Versteegh highlights, there are few Arabic/Farsi bilingual speakers except in the province of Khuzestan which has remained Arabic-speaking. (Versteegh, *Op. Cit.*, p.491).

⁵ Azerbaijan is currently situated to the far north of ‘Irān, one of its famous cities was Tabreez (Tabriz) currently in the extreme north of ‘Irān. See:

http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth/caucasus_cntrl_asia_pol_oo.jpg

1. People who are originally of Arab descent and maintained the Arabic language and place of origin. Or maintained the language and not the place of origin, or maintained the place of origin and not the Arabic language.⁶
2. People who are originally of Arab descent, in fact they are from Bani Hāshim but their language and place of residence became non-Arabic, or one of the two.⁷
3. People who are not aware of their origin and do not know if they are originally of Arabic descent or non-Arabic descent. Most of the people today are of this kind, regardless of whether they were Arabs of the place of homeland or language, or non-Arabic in one of the two.

Likewise, Arabs by way of language spilt into three categories:

1. People that speak Arabic in pronunciation, articulation and intonation.
2. People that speak Arabic in pronunciation but not with intonation. Such as those who became Arabicized (*musta’rab*) and had not studied the Arabic language from the Arabs and spoke another languages, then they studied the Arabic language later. This is the case with most of the people of knowledge that had learnt Arabic.
3. People that no longer speak Arabic, except a little.

So the two groups of people, one of which were strongly affected by Arabic and the other that was more influenced by non-Arabic and those who had already gave in either by power or by custom and tradition. So if Arabic divides into origin, language

⁶ In his explanation to *‘Iqtidā’ as-Sirāt ul-Mustaqeem* (Istiqāmah Recordings: Riyadh and ‘Unayzah, 1416 A.H, tape no. 13), the Noble Shaykh Muhammad bin Sālih al-‘Uthaymeen (*rahimahullāh*) was asked:

“How can it be possible for a person that does not know Arabic, to be an Arab by way of residence and from the children of the Arabs, even though the person does not possess the Arabic language and tongue?”

The Shaykh responded by saying:

Yes it is possible and this is apparent, for example, if there is a person in the Arabian peninsula but does not know the Arabic language. The workers that we have who do not know the Arabic language are spoken to by children in the languages of the workers, not in Arabic. Sometimes a translator is needed, so a child will translate from the language of the servants and workers into Arabic. They are not Arabs originally, but it is possible for them to be Arabs by way of residence and home, but not Arabs by language.

and residence then the rulings differ due to the difference in these divisions, especially with regards to origin and language. The intent here is that what I mentioned about the disapproval of imitating the non-Arabs is just something which was of importance during the early era of Islām, from the first and foremost people (the Sahābah). As everything that was closer to their guidance is preferred, and everything that differs from their guidance is contradictory. Regardless of whether an opponent to that guidance today is an original Arab by descent or an Arab by language, and this has come from the Salaf. Al-Hāfidh Abū Tāhir as-Silafī in [his book] *The Virtue of the Arabs* narrated from Abū Ja’far Muhammad bin ‘Ali bin al-Hasan ibn ‘Ali that he said: “Whoever is born into Islām is an Arab.” This is narrated from Abū Ja’far. Because whoever is born into Islām is born into the homeland of the Arabs and acquired its speech, this is how the matter is.⁸ Whoever contemplates on what we have mentioned in this chapter will know the intent of the Sharee’ah in what we have mentioned from the blessed agreement and the censured opposition to it, as I began with the indications of it, its reasons and the wisdom in it.

⁸ It is mentioned in the explanation of *‘Iqtidā’ as-Sirāt ul-Mustaqeem* (Istiqāmah Recordings: Riyadh and ‘Unayzah, 1416 A.H, tape no. 13) by Shaykh Muhammad bin Sālih al-‘Uthaymeen (*rahimahullāh*), a narration from as-Silafī from Abū Qāsim al-Hallāl from Abū Muhammad al-Hasan ibn Husayn an-Nawbakhtī from ‘Ali ibn ‘Abdillāh al-Mubashir from Ibn Harb al-Mashā’ī from Ishāq al-Azraq from Hishām ibn Hassan from Hasan from Abū Hurayrah (*radi Allāhu ‘anhu*) who said “*whoever speaks Arabic is an Arab.*” However, this hadeeth is not authentic for it contains the *‘an’an* of al-Hasan who is Mudallis. It has also been noted by Ibn Asākir, adh-Dhahabī and an-Nasā’ī that the *hadeeth*, which is also found in *Tarīkh ud-Dimashq* of Ibn Asākir, is not authentic due to the presence of Salmān bin ‘Abdillāh who is a weak narrator and unreliable.