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MUHAMMAD AND THE COVENANT OF NAJRAN

Abstract

At the turn of the VI-VII centuries, the situation in the Middle East region was determined by the conflict between Byzantine Empire and Sasanian Iran. There was no centralized state on the Arabian Peninsula, and the regions there and their rulers participated in the geopolitical conflicts of the above-mentioned superpowers as an auxiliary military force. During Muhammad's lifetime, the fate of the Arabian Peninsula was mostly determined by the regional military and political-economic conjuncture.

As a result of the strengthening of the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia in the 4th century, Christianity spread in the city of Najran, where the trade route from North (Hejaz) and East (Yamama) was passing through. The religious situation was also complicated by the fact that in the II-III centuries, Judaism spread in South Arabia, which was brought here by Jewish merchants. At the beginning of the VI century, the ruling elite of the Himyar kingdom in South Arabia adopted Judaism, which meant the final separation from Christian Ethiopia. In 525, with the instigation and support of the Byzantine Empire, the Aksumite Ethiopian kingdom occupied South Arabia, which was later conquered by Sasanian Iran in the 570s. Iran established its control over the transit trade leading to the weakening of trade and economic relations vital to the Arabs. Consequently, the political influence of the Iranian and Byzantine Empires strengthened even more on the Arabian Peninsula. In addition, under the influence of Christianity and Judaism, preachers of pure monotheism appeared – Hanifs, who rejected the worship of tribal idols. It is believed that it was the Hanif movement that gave rise to Muhammad's missionary work.

In the pre-Islamic period, against the background of widespread idolatry in the territory of the Arabian Peninsula, the religious communities of Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans, also had quite firm positions. The Qur'ān designates them as *اهل الكتاب* ("people of the Holy Book").

The Prophet Muhammad and the Arab Caliphs concluded treaties with the Christian communities of various cities about peace, security, capitulation, or non-obligation (deeds of protection), in which the legal status of Christians was defined. The majority of these covenants were not included in classical Islamic sources. Because of this, the authenticity of these treaties of peace and security has been questioned by both Muslim and Western scholars. However, the theological and political significance of these treaties is indisputable both in terms of Muslim-Christian relations and in the study of the history of the relationship between the followers of Islam and the peoples they subjugated.

In this work, the relationship between the founder of Islam and the Christian people of Najran and the treaty of peace and security concluded between them, which we translated into Georgian, is analyzed. It is examined in the context of the political environment of the Arabian Peninsula, international relations, and the geopolitical situation of the region. Examination of this covenant allows us to generalize the Muslim-Christian socio-political and cultural relations in the history of early Islam.

The conclusion shows that by signing these types of treaties, the prophet of Allah openly opposed the neighboring empires of Iran and Byzantine, whose spheres of influence he took away. This was, in fact, tantamount to engaging in open confrontations with them.

Keywords: Muhammad, Arabian Peninsula, Christians, regional geopolitics, diplomacy, covenant/treaty of peace and security.

At the time of the emergence of Islam, various Christian denominations were busy organizing their churches. Each of them, whether by will or against it, was dividing "matrix ecclesia", which, at that

moment, had already been dismantled into various ecclesiastical congregations (Debie 2016, 54). The Qur’ān should also inform us about this fact (Qur’ān 2006, 19:37; 2:253, 6:159, 42:14).

S. Griffith disagrees with the idea of those researchers, who think that Muhammad had frequent contact with minor heretical groups of Christians. They no longer existed at that time. He notes that the founder of Islam must have had regular contacts with Jacobian, Nestorian, and Melkite Christians, of whom the Qur’an speaks as “Nazarenes” or “Nazoreans” – a Syrian term designating collective Christians (Griffith 2001, 314). S. Griffith writes that Christian terminology mentioned in the Qur’ān indicates that during Muhammad, local people of the Hejaz region were well familiar with Christianity. It seems that several Christian communities lived around the people of Hejaz, and Islam was in a dialogue mode with both Judaism and Christianity from the beginning (Griffith 2001, 314).

In the pre-Islamic period, the Persian Gulf region was almost entirely Christianized, largely through the efforts of Nestorian missionaries and merchants patronized by Sasanian Iran (Crone 2004, 46-47). This is confirmed by the Nestorian churches discovered by archaeologists in Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar in the past decades, most of which date back to the 6th century (Elders 2001; Carter 2008; Hoyland 2001).

The Byzantine Empire also successfully used the strategy of religious expansion to achieve political goals and gain influence in the region, which meant the spread of Christianity as an ideological weapon in different regions of the world, including the Arabian Peninsula (Zouberi 2017, 121).

G. Lobjanidze writes, *“An Attitude of the Qur’ān toward Christianity is not heterogeneous. It oscillates between friendly kindness and hostility. The amplitude of this fluctuation, not infrequently, depends on the personal attitude of the Prophet, and afterward, on the interests of Islam”* (Lobzhanidze 2004, 188).

By 630, when Muhammad unified the Arabian Peninsula, Muslims and those Christian Arabs living in the northern regions of the peninsula found themselves in antagonistic positions, as the latter pursued Byzantine political interests in the region. (Watt 1956, 319-320). According to M. Watt, precisely in that period, verses of the Qur’ān came down on the last Prophet of Allah, in which we read the calls to fight against the Christians and to impose the *jizya* (Qur’ān 2006, 9:29-32).

Exactly this historical moment coincided with the conclusion of the treaty of Najran, which is a very important document from the perspective of Muslim-Christian relations. During the Great Arab Conquests, it became a classical example for the Arab generals in defining the relations with those Christian communities, who were subjugated on the ground of peace agreements. In 630-631, in the so-called “year of ambassadorship”, delegations from different regions of the Arabian Peninsula approached Muhammad, who was victorious in the political and religious arena, in order to sign trade or diplomatic agreements with him (Ibn Hisham 2007, 578).

The treaties concluded between Muhammad and the Yemeni delegates mainly related to the obligation to pay *jizya* from the harvest of date and palm crops, as well as to the duty of paying *sadaqah*¹ from the fruits of irrigated lands (Ibn Hisham 2007, 580-582). In turn, these delegations asked Muhammad for advice on various social issues (Piotrovsky 1985, 127).

According to Timothy Power, Muhammad did not ask these delegations to accept Islam since the main goal of these meetings was not the discussion of religious matters (Power 2012, 89-90). However, Maham Mirza believes that the Najran delegation’s meeting with Muhammad was not a political dialogue but a theological discourse, which scholarly circles have long denied (Mirza 2011, 159-170). This point of view was shared by S. Griffith as well (Griffith 2001, 309).

The founder of Islam had a religious conversation and dialogue with the delegation from Najran, which was reverberated in the Qur’ān’s 107-147 ayahs of the second surah as well in 1-80 ayahs of the third surah (Qur’ān 2006, 464).

Who were the Najranites, and why did they occupy such an important place in early Islamic-Christian relations? Pre-Islamic Najran was known for agriculture and industry. In the city, the production of weapons, manufacturing of high-quality textiles, and trade were promoted. Najran came under the political and cultural influence of the Himyarite Kingdom in the III century. From the V century, it became the center of the Monophysite Church and established close contacts with the Church of Syria-Palestine. And the ecclesiastical eparchy was established in the city. We read about the city in the Qur’ān in an allegorical form of the allusion: *“The Cities on which We had poured Our blessings, We had placed*

¹ Charity given voluntarily to please God in Islam.

Cities in prominent positions.” (Qur’ān 2006, 34:18). During Muhammad’s life, the dominant tribe in the city was the Balharith, in which Banu ‘Abd al-Madan was a prominent lineage (Shahid 2003, 500-501).

Yemen was fragmented during the lifetime of the founder of Islam. Once under the complete control of Sasanian Iran, Najran no longer had a central administrative system anymore. The bedouin raids from the North had been constantly added to this (Watt 1956, 25-26). The southern regions of Yemen were subject to Sasanian Iran during Muhammad’s period and were directly included in its territory (Negrya 1981, 49-50). The occupation of Yemen by the Persians was mainly due to the presence of silver and gold mines there (Dunlop 1957, 41-43).

During Muhammad, Abna’s communities fortified in Yemen were under the total control of Iran (Piotrovsky 1985, 150-151). In the V-VI centuries, Abna’ had been holding high administrative positions and gathering taxes on behalf of the Persians. Abna’ was operating a silver mining process and possessed the main silver mines there as well (Piotrovsky 1985, 102).

After the assassination of Khosrow II, from 628 to 632, a period of unrest began in Iran caused by the desire to seize the throne. Consequently, by that time, Muhammad, who had won over Mecca, had a good chance to establish control over those regions of the Arabian Peninsula that were former Iranian spheres of influence. This is verified by the concluded covenants between him on the one hand, and the people of Bahrain and Najran, on the other (Robin 2012, 298).

Abna’ were politically very oppressed in the 620s and was looking for a stable political ally to rescue themselves (Watt 1956, 129), so the last *Marzpan*² of Yemen – Badan had no choice but to accept Islam and political submission to Muhammad (Power 2012, 83).

The links between the Prophet of Allah and the Najranite Christians were established as early as the Meccan period. According to Ibn Ishaq, approximately 20 Christians had come to Muhammad in Mecca before the death of Abu Talib (619). Ibn Ishaq believes that the delegation of Najranite Christians was from Ethiopia, but then he adds they say that these Christians had arrived from Najran, but only God knows whether that was so or not (Guillaume 2006, 179). According to Ibn Kathir, Najranian Christians had arrived in Medina twice in 9/631 and 10/632 (Ibn Kathir 1998, 73-75). In the work of an unknown Nestorian historian from the IX century, “The Chronicle of Seert”, we read the names of the delegation members: ‘Abd al-Masih al-Najrāni al-Ghassānī, Al-Sayyid Ghassāni, ‘Abdu Yashu, Ibn Hijrah, Ibrāhīm the monk and ‘Isa the Bishop (Scher 1919, 605).

As it becomes clear, Muhammad prayed with the Najranians in his own mosque (Ibn Sa’d n.d., 307). At first, Muhammad was silent because of the wealthy clothes of the guests (Ibn Sa’d n.d., 307). The next day, Najranite Christians showed themselves in simple clothes in front of Muhammad. The Prophet of Allah called them to accept Islam (Qur’ān 2006, 3:31-32, 126), namely to the faith that Muhammad established in Medina and not to the confession of God, in general (Nickel 2006, 187). Najranians rejected this proposal, so “the conversation and quarrel between them increased” (Ibn Sa’d n.d., 307). The people of Najran replied to Muhammad that they were already “trustees of God” before Muhammad.

Muqatil ibn Sulayman – an 8th-century commentator of the Qur’ān, mentioned that verses 5:72-77 and 4:171-172 of the Qur’ān were also revealed in reference to the people of Najran (Nickel 2006, 177). In the third Surah of the Qur’ān, it is well illustrated that Muhammad narrated to the Najranians the story of the Nativity of Mary, the Annunciation to Zechariah of the birth of John the Baptist (Prophet Yahya in Islam) by the Angel, which would be the precursor and evangelist of the “Word of Allah”³ as well as told them the story of Zechariah becoming mute (Qur’ān 2006, 3:40-41). Muhammad also spoke with them about the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, the Immaculate Conception of Jesus (‘Īsā al-Masih ibn Maryam in Islam) and drew their attention to how Jesus, being a newborn was able to talk in the cradle (Qur’ān 2006, 3:42/46). Muhammad also spoke to the people of Najran about the various miracles performed by Jesus and his ascension to heaven (Qur’ān 2006, 3:48). Muhammad reminded the people of Najran that they were divided in their faith and disagreed among themselves (Qur’ān 2006, 3:59/66, 3:57/64, 3:101/105).

Muhammad was ready to accept the offer of the Najranites – that the curse of Allah would be upon those who erred among them (al-Baladhuri 1916, 99). This curse in Islamic historiography is known as *Mubahala* (Qur’ān 2006, 3:54/61). When Muhammad failed to convince Najranians, the treaty of peace and security was concluded between them as a compromise and consensus. This document defined

² The military commander in charge of border provinces of the Sasanian Empire.

³ In Islam, “the Word of Allah” is Prophet Jesus.

the style of relations that would form the basis of the treaties signed by Arab Muslim generals with subjugated Christian communities in the following decades (Japaridze 1999, 153-154).

The Najran treaty, recorded by Al-Baladhuri (Al-Balādhurī 1987, 85-89), was translated into Russian by L. Nadiradze and M. Piotrovsky (Nadiradze 1968, 84-85). Muhammad Siddique Qureshi translated this covenant of peace and security into English in 1991. We bring that translation without any changes in this article. In the Georgian version of this article, we offer our Georgian translation of this document.

“In the Name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful. This is a writ of protection between Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah, and the People of Najran. Although he has the power to take his share from their fruit, gold, silver, iron (arms), and slaves, he has left all of these things for them provided that they pay two thousand garments of stipulated value every year, one thousand in Rajab, and the other one thousand in Safar. Each garment will be equal to one awqiyyah [a measure of weight]. Anything below or above this number will be calculated. The [suits of] armor, horse or carriages will be calculated as well. It is the obligation of the people of Najran to lodge and board my messengers. No messenger will remain for more than one month. If there is a disorder in Yemen, the people of Najran commit to lending thirty [suits of] armor, thirty horses, and thirty camels. In the event of any casualty or destruction of private property, the people of Najran will be compensated. To the Christians of Najran and its neighboring territories, God’s protection and the pledge of His Prophet extend to their lives, religion, and property. It applies to those who are present as well as those who are absent. There shall be no interference with the practice of their faith or their religious observances. There will be no change to their rights and privileges. No bishop shall be removed from his bishopric; no monk from his monastery, and no priest from his parish. They shall all continue to enjoy everything they previously enjoyed, great or small.⁴ No image or cross shall be destroyed. They will not oppress or be oppressed. They shall not practice blood vengeance as they did in the Days of Ignorance. No tithe shall be levied from them, nor shall they be required to furnish provisions for the Muslim troops. If anyone demands his right from you, justice will be maintained between you. You will not be oppressed, nor will you be allowed to oppress others. Whoever from among you engages in usury after this, will be excluded from my protection. No one shall be held responsible for another’s crime. Whatever is mentioned in this treaty is from Allah, and Muhammad is responsible for it until Allah sends a new command. This treaty is binding so long as they are loyal, fulfill their obligations, and avoid what is wrong.

Witnessed by Abu Sufyan ibn Harb, Ghilan ibn ‘Amr, Malik ibn Awf, Aqra ibn Habis, Mughira ibn Shu’ba. Written by ‘Abd Allah ibn Abu Bakr.” (Al-Balādhurī 1987, 85-89; Qureshi 1991, 182-183).

Conclusion

By concluding the covenants of Najran and Dumat al-Jandal, the founder of Islam openly confronted Iran and the Byzantine Empires. He must have been ready for the confrontation with these Empires. However, the founder of Islam seems to have realized that the Byzantines and Persians would not dare to intervene militarily deep in the territories of the Arabian Peninsula.

The legal status of Christians was recorded in this document. It served as an example for Muslim generals to determine their attitude towards Christians in future wars of Arab conquest.

The Prophet of Allah acted according to the laws of war and diplomacy already existing in the region when signing treaties with the political powers of the region. By establishing relations with Najran and Dumat al-Jandal and signing treaties with them, the theocratic community of Medina announced its appearance in the international political arena and, at the same time, recruited the regions under the nominal influence of the Iranian and Byzantine Empires into its camp.

Therefore, the confrontation of Medina with Iran and the Byzantine Empire began during Muhammad. Since Iran left the concluded covenant between Muhammad and Najranians without any reaction, this means that Ctesiphon de-jure recognized Najran as a sphere of influence of the Islamic State. At that time, Iran would no longer have the strength to regain control over this region.

The dialogue and verbal dispute between Muhammad and the Najranians on theological issues, which took place during the “year of ambassadorship”, had such a great impact on the political history of Islam that it was extensively documented in the verses of the holy Qur’ān. This means that from the Islamic viewpoint, Muhammad’s conversation with them was guided by divine inspiration. Therefore,

⁴ Despite this, according to Al-Baladhuri, the founder of Islam appointed ‘Amr ibn Hazm al-Nasri as a governor of Najran, and after him, Abu Sufian ibn Harbi (Al-Baladhuri 1916, 107).

Muhammad's exchange with Najranians and the concluded covenant between them is a prominent example of Islamic political theology.

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