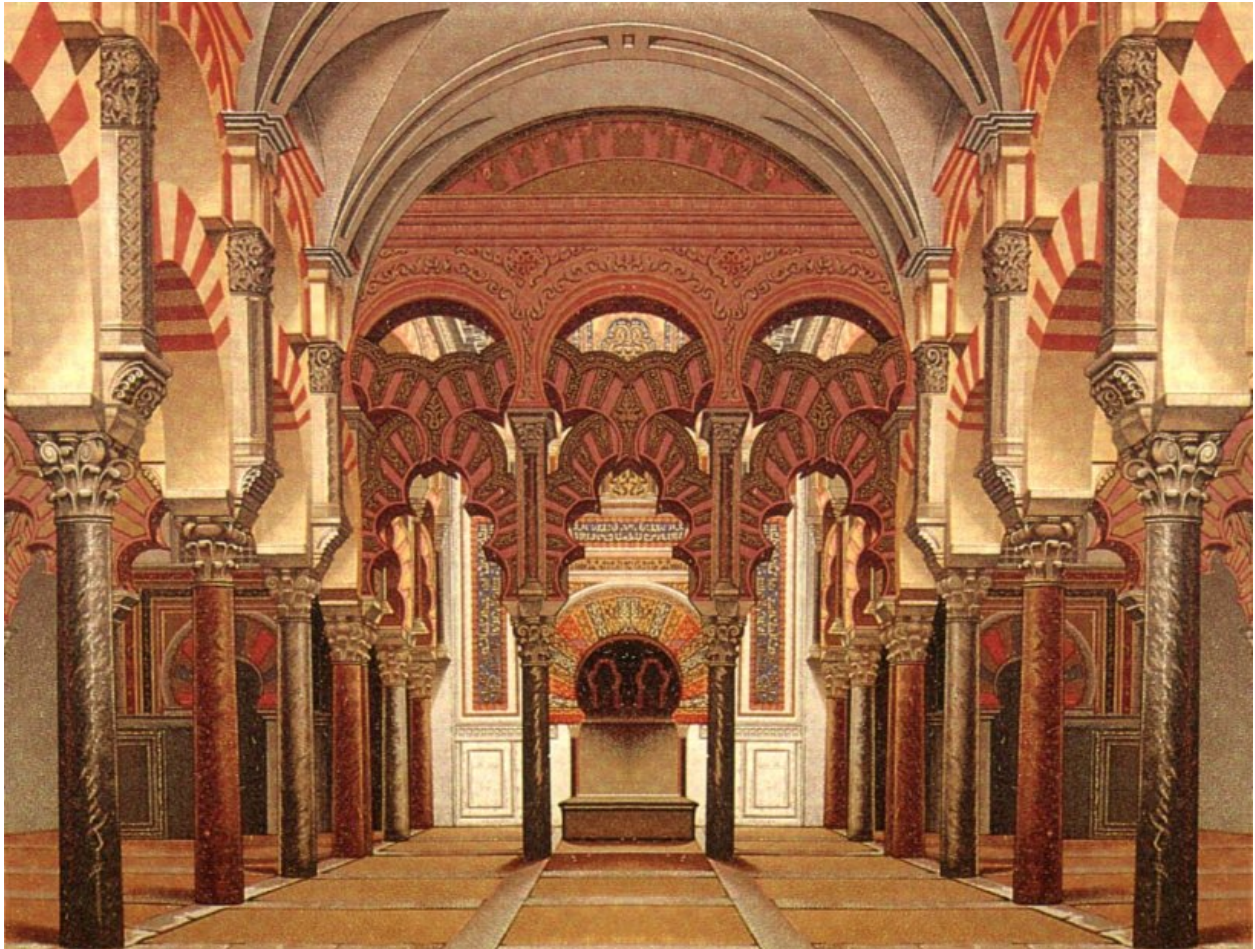


# The Berber Identity: A Double Helix of Islam and War

By Alvin Okoreeh



**Mezquita de Córdoba, Interior.**

Muslim Spain is characterized by a myriad of sophisticated and complex dynamics that invariably draw from a foundation rooted in an ethnically diverse populace made up of Arabs, Berbers, muwalladun, Mozarebs, Jews, and Christians. According to most scholars, the overriding theme for this period in the Iberian Peninsula is an unprecedented level of tolerance. The actual level of tolerance experienced by its inhabitants is debatable and relative to time, however, commensurate with the idea of tolerance is the premise that each of the aforementioned groups was able to leave a distinct mark on the era of Muslim dominance in Spain. The Arabs, with longstanding ties to supremacy in Damascus and Baghdad exercised authority as the

conqueror and imbued al-Andalus with culture and learning until the fall of the caliphate in 1031. The Berbers were at times allies with the Arabs and Christians, were often enemies with everyone on the Iberian Peninsula, and in the times of the taifas, Almoravid and Almohad dynasties, were the rulers of al-Andalus. The muwalladun, subjugated by Arab perceptions of a dubious conversion to Islam, were mired in compulsory ineptitude under the pretense that their conversion to Islam would yield a more prosperous life. The Mozarebs and Jews, referred to as “people of the book,” experienced a wide spectrum of societal conditions ranging from prosperity to withering persecution. This paper will argue that the Berbers, by virtue of cultural assimilation and an identity forged by militant aggressiveness and religious zealotry, were the most influential ethno-religious group in Muslim Spain from the time of the initial Muslim conquest of Spain by Berber-led Umayyad forces to the last vestige of Muslim dominance in Spain during the time of the Almohads.

### The Berber Identity: Berbers role in the Conquest

After a reconnaissance mission revealed weaknesses in the Visigothic defenses in al-Andalus, the Berber lieutenant, Tariq Ibn Ziyad, led a Muslim army across the Straits of Gibraltar into Spain in 711 CE marking the initial campaign of Muslim conquest in al-Andalus. He was accompanied by 7,000 troops, the majority of whom were Berbers while the remaining troops were comprised of Arabs. According to Fierro, “The number of Arabs among the first Muslim conquerors was small compared with that of the Berbers, but they enjoyed a privileged status as Arabs.”[1] This suggests two things: First, the infantry of the original conquering Muslim armies was likely comprised of Berbers, inasmuch as Arabs enjoyed preferential treatment and would not generally be put on the front lines to engage in combat. This means that not only was the Muslim conquest of Spain led by a Berber commander, (Tariq), but the victory was achieved at the end of the swords and maces of the Berber element of Muslim forces. It can therefore be argued that the Muslims may not have conquered Spain at all had it not been for the military exploits of the Berbers. The second point Fierro makes was that although both Arabs and Berbers constituted the Muslim aristocracy who were either loyalists to the kings or military proprietors that would aid the king in wars,[2] the Berbers did not enjoy the privileged status that the Arabs did. The preferred status of the Arabs would breed discontent in the relationship between the Arabs and the Berbers. Musa Ibn Nusayr (Tariq’s patron and the *mawali* commander of an Arab speaking Syrian army who along with Tariq, completed the Muslim conquest of al-Andalus) echoed an increasingly anti-Berber sentiment that would permeate throughout al-Andalus. The Umayyad Caliph in Damascus,

Sulayman, asked Musa about the Berbers and according to Ibn Habib, Musa responded, “they are the non-Arabs who most resemble the Arabs [in their] bravery, steadfastness, endurance and horsemanship, except that they are the most treacherous of people (al-na’s) – they [have] no [care for] loyalty, nor for pacts.” [3]The brooding discord between the Arabs and the Berbers would be an ongoing theme that created turbulence during the entire Muslim occupation of Spain as Clarke points out “the Arab-Berber cultural rivalry was a live issue in al-Andalus.”[4]

### The Berber Legacy: Establishment of the Emirate of Cordoba

The Umayyad Dynasty, who ruled the Muslim world in Damascus since the 7<sup>th</sup> century, was virtually eviscerated by a bloody coup de tat executed by the Abbasids who made claims to the caliphate. Abd al-Rahman I managed to escape and was one of the few survivors of the Abbasids massacre of the Umayyads. Fleeing for his life across North Africa from Syria “he found a welcome among the Berbers in Morocco, ”[5] according to O’Callaghan. Presumably outnumbered by Abbasid assassins, Abd al-Rahman I procured the protection of the Berbers. Accordingly, it stands to reason that the Berbers helped facilitate the eventual rise of the emirate of Cordoba by providing asylum to the estranged Umayyad prince whose family was undoubtedly on the brink of extinction in Damascus at the hands of the Abbasids. The establishment of the emirate in Cordoba would be the beginning of the most stable and prominent era of Muslim Spain. The Berbers would attempt to foil their Arab adversaries but would paradoxically also assist the Arabs to strengthen their position. O’Callaghan points out that after Abd al-Rahman I’s successful conquering of al-Andalus, “he worked tirelessly to secure the position he won.”[6] Interestingly enough, it was the Berbers who provided the most ardent challenges according to O’Callaghan, “the Berbers who had supported him initially proved to be his most persistent antagonists, carrying on guerilla warfare against him for many years until 776.”[7] The perpetuation of fighting provoked by the Berbers both reveals their militant nature and unveils a recurring theme of the Umayyad occupation of Al Andalus which is marked by internal conflicts that took away focus from further advancements by the Muslims against the Christian states in northern Spain. In an ironic twist, it was the Berbers religious affiliation with Islam that would prove instrumental during the dawning of the Umayyad caliphate in Muslim Spain further solidifying Arab dominance in the region.

## The Berber Legacy Pt. 2: The Establishment of the Caliphate of Cordoba

As it relates to the religious aspects of life in Muslim Spain for the Berbers, cultural changes precipitated a focus on religion for the Berbers that would have an indelible impact in the climate of Muslim Spain. Fiero elucidates, “Its end (intermarriage between Christian and Muslim elites) was an indication of the role religion would play in the events of later centuries, particularly during the times of the Crusades and the militant *jihad* Berber movements.”[8] I assert that the matter of religion played a factor prior to that point, specifically as it relates to supporting the establishment of the Caliphate. In addition to his desire to thwart the recently established Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt, and in opposition to the eastern Abbasid Caliphate now centered in Baghdad, Abd al-Rahman III’s dynastic claims to caliphal power in al-Andalus were a result of his Arab ancestry derived from the Quraysh tribe, which linked him to being a true descendant of the Prophet Muhammad’s tribe. Abd al-Rahman III contemplated that the religious conversion of Berbers to Islam effectively rendered the Berbers as clients of the Umayyads because the conversion took place during Umayyad’s reign in Damascus in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.[9] Accordingly, Abd al-Rahman III was able to garner the support of not only his family’s contacts but also that of the large population of Berbers on the peninsula who were a landed subclass comprised of military expatriates. In doing so, the Berbers effectively helped Abd al-Rahman III legitimize his claim to the Caliphate. This forever tied the Berbers, as a people, to the religious aspects of their existence in the Muslim world. Cordoba would enjoy a period of sustained recognition throughout Europe as the cultural epicenter and intellectual fulcrum on the continent. The Iberian Peninsula would soon dramatically change under the reign of al-Mansür and once again the Berbers would be central actors in the epoch of Muslim Spain.

## The Berber Ultimatum: The Fall of the Caliphate

The impact of the Berber demographic, particularly its military, would continue to proliferate under the leadership of Abd al Rahman III as contemplated by Fiero who states, “the Caliph’s policy was to increase the number of professional or mercenary troops...The Berbers would become especially important in al-Hakam II’s army, in a process contributing to the dismantling of the caliphate in the so-called ‘Berber anarchy’ at the end of the tenth century.”[10] The reign Mohammad Ibn Abi Amir, also known as al-Mansür, essentially sealed the fate of the Caliphate in Cordoba, which would be in steady decline after misappropriations of the caliph title and would disintegrate after al-Mansür’s death.

The Berbers would play a pivotal role during the rule of al-Mansür, which marked the height of caliphate in Spain and precipitated the fall of the caliphate as well as the establishment of taifa kingdoms. When al-Mansür became the de facto leader of the Umayyad Caliphate from his government position of *hajib* he set into motion a devious plot to supplant the Umayyad Dynasty with the Amirids, his own namesake, as the leaders of the Muslim world in Spain. Three major elements of al-Mansür's reign would have lasting effects on the future of the peninsula: 1. The implementation of a military force comprised of professional soldiers/mercenaries from Berber and Slav origin. 2. The corruption of the dynastic culture of the Umayyad's usurping their power and manipulating the caliphal governmental structure, which enabled al-Mansür to appoint his sons, al-Muffazar and later Sanjul (who applied his policies deftly and haphazardly respectively) as successor *hajibs*, and 3. The pursuit of a policy of *jihad*, that would manifest in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries during the reigns of the Almoravids and Almohads.

The implementation of a military force made up primarily of Berbers and Slav soldiers would prove to be detrimental to the effectiveness of the caliphate. As Kennedy states, "The expense was considerable and the conquests ephemeral, but the most important legacy (of al-Mansür) in al-Andalus was the large number of new Berber troops." [11] Kennedy's statements assert the prominence and importance of the Berber military faction as an integral element in the politics of al-Andalus. The most significant element of the influx of Berber soldiers in al-Andalus was comprised of Zirids, the Sanhaja tribal confederation from Tunisia. The two Zirid chiefs, Zawi and Maksan Zirid revolted against their great nephew al-Buluggin, denounced their loyalty to the Fatimids and pledged allegiance to Cordoban rule. Both of the chiefs along with their troops were exiled and subsequently recruited to be in al-Mansür's army. The recruitment of these tribal entities would create a reliance on the support of Berber tribes in North Africa, would result in the establishment of the Berber Zirid dynasty in Granada and the subsequent annexation of al-Andalus by the Almoravids and Almohads.

Sanjul, who was al-Mansür's second son and was named successor *hajib*, made two critical errors that were departures from his father and brother's meticulous manipulation of power within the caliphate. He brazenly coerced the inept Hisham II to name him successor caliph. This was a departure from the tradition of caliphs, which were commonly descendants of the Quraysh tribe. In another egregious misstep, Sanjul openly pledged his reliance on Berber troops. Both actions alienated the Umayyad contingent, which culminated with the remaining Umayyad loyalists appointing their own caliph, Muhammad al Mahdi.[12] When Sanjul died, the final remnants of the

Amirid dynasty died with him. After being exiled by al-Mahdi, the Berbers, influenced by the Zirid tribal chiefs, were threatened by the installation of a new government and loss of the status they enjoyed during al-Mansür's reign. In opposition to al-Mahdi, the Berbers appointed their own caliph, Sulayman which created anarchy in al-Andalus. The caliphal schism exacerbated by the Berbers provided the second instance (the first was the Berber Revolt in 741 CE) wherein Berber upheaval allowed the Christian states to slowly recover territories that were lost during the Muslim conquest. Kennedy suggests, "Another consequence of the confusion in Cordoba was an immediate shift in the balance of power between Muslims and the Christians in the peninsula." [13]

Considering the fact that al-Mansür's reign did not result in any long lasting gain in territory for the caliphate despite these territories being, at the time, particularly vulnerable to seizure by Muslims, it can be argued that al-Mansür's reign masqueraded as a devotion to *jihad*, but was in actuality a blood-stained escapade of pillage and plunder to placate his vast army of Berber mercenaries with booty. Safran would argue that al-Mansür's devoutness, at least on its surface, was genuine, "al-Mansur's public commitment to the purity of the faith is represented in reports of his purge of al-Hakam II's of all books dealing with philosophy and materialism in the presence of the important *ulama* (jurists)." [14] However, the implications of the policies to implement a Berber mercenary force as the military and to pursue a call for *jihad*, whether legitimate or not, left a long-lasting impression on the Berbers who would assert their dominance in the peninsula later.

### The Berber Supremacy: The Taifas, Almoravids and Almohads

As the caliphate was abolished, the territories in al Andalus were split into petty kingdoms referred to as taifas. The composition of these taifas is interesting to note as illuminated by Kennedy who provides, "The rulers who emerged in the 1010s and 1020s can be divided, roughly speaking into four groups, local Arab patrician families, old established Berber chiefs, saqaliba leaders, and newly arrived Berber soldiers." [15] It should be noted that neither muwalladuns nor Mozarebs ruled over taifas and Jews were often sequestered to their own living quarters. This coupled with the fact that Berbers represented roughly 50% of the ruling class during the taifa period further justifies the implication of the Berber influence in al-Andalus being of seminal importance. Three of the most recognized taifas were Badajoz, Granada, and Seville, all of which were ruled by Berber enclaves. The common force mounting against these three taifas was the unrelenting pressure being

applied by the advancing Christian states and Alonso VI. With full understanding that the taifa kings could potentially lose their kingdoms to the more powerful Almoravids, the taifas had no choice but to seek military assistance from the barbaric, religiously zealous Berber dynasty. The kings/*hajibs* of the taifas were unable to adequately defend their kingdoms. After receiving assistance from the Almoravid the taifas would later succumb to the hyper religious Almoravids whose central theme was reformation of Islam through a call for *jihad*.

Jayyusi suggests, “following their conversion to Islam, Berbers, like Arabs felt they possessed a religious message they must struggle to spread.”[16] The Almoravids of North Africa were a religious sect that “attempted to rekindle a new zeal for the faith among the Berber tribes of the Sahara,”[17] O’Callaghan goes on to state, “the Almoravids were fanatical puritans who insisted upon rigorous observance of Muslim law.” The Almoravids provide an example of the Berber’s fusion of religious zealotry and military proficiency. Their leader Yusuf ibn Tafshufin was “a rude Berber endowed with great military talent.”[18] After assisting the taifas repel the advances of the Christian princes initially, the Almoravids annexed the land controlled by the taifas and took control of al-Andalus.

In 1147, the Almoravids were completely eradicated by the Almohads, a Masmuda Berber Tribe led by Ibn Tumart who took over control of North Africa and reasserted Muslim dominance in al-Andalus. Ibn Tumart led a spiritual revival of Islam engineered through reform subscribing to an even more rigorous fundamentalist approach to the tenets of Islam than the Almoravids who softened in the relaxed environment of the taifas. The reform would be achieved by utilizing a military as a call for *jihad*. Ibn Tumart called for a reforming of the Islamic nation following the period of the taifas and Almoravids whose languid interpretation and application of Islamic values and laws was the antithesis of the Almohad approach to Islam. According to al-Marrakushi, “he (Tumart) raised a considerable army of Masmuda and told them: ‘March against these heretics and perverters of religion who call themselves the al-Murabits (Almoravids) and call them to...reform their morals.’”[19] The power structure for the Almohad dynasty relied on the Berbers, as Fromherz illuminates, “The loyalty and tribal solidarity of Berber tribal sheikhs was essential to the Almohads’ success.” [20] Fromherz’s assertion suggests that the Berbers represented a powerful entity for the Almohad dynasty in al-Andalus and O’Callaghan reiterates this point advancing the notion that “the Almohads, were to prove one of the most dangerous enemies of Christian Spain.”[21] Sans Granada, where Berber forces continued their influence during the Nasrid dynasty as the “most

important element of the army of the Kingdom of Granada...as warriors of the faith,”[22] the loss in the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa and conflict in North Africa would eventually force the Almohads to recoil to the advances of the Christians and effectively end Muslim dominance in Spain.

According to Cordoban historian Ibn Hayyan, “Berbers are on the point of placing the peninsula in a deadly peril by the end of the century that will pass shortly, unless God can save Islam.”[23] Hayyan’s words resonate with the desperation of a man all too familiar with the prolific influence of the Berbers in Muslim Spain. An argument can be made that the Arabs, the original conquerors of the Iberian Peninsula, were the most influential group given the stability and prominence Arab leadership brought al-Andalus. However after 1031, when the caliphate was abolished, the Arabs never recaptured the power it enjoyed during the caliphate and subsequently faded into obscurity. A cogent argument could also be made that the Christians were the most influential ethno-religious group in Muslim Spain. After all, the Christians were the victors in the Reconquista. However it should be noted that the first instances of success at recovering the land they lost to the Muslims during the conquest were by-products of unrest instigated by the Berbers. Whether it was through military exploits, religious fanaticism, or playing a role in the validation of the caliph, the DNA of the Berbers made them catalysts in the volatile, evolving landscape of Muslim Spain and undoubtedly the most influential ethno-religious group on the Iberian Peninsula.

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## Footnotes

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