Shu'ubia Movement as a Defense Against Islam

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The word Shu'ubiyya is derived from the forty-ninth Sura of the Qur'an, where Allah demands mutual respect between different peoples (shu'ub). It was primarily a movement among Persian scribes and officials and their opponents which included some Persians were mostly scholars and philologians. But as Michael Axworthy observes:

Shu'ubiyya sometimes went beyond asserting equality or parity in favor of the superiority of Persian culture, and especially literature. Given the religious history of Persia and the lingering attachment of many Persians to Mazdaean or sub-Mazdaean beliefs, Shu'ubiyya also implied a challenge to Islam, or at least to the form of Islam practised by the Arabs. A satirical contemporary recorded the attitude of a typical young scribe, steeped in the texts that recorded the history and the procedures of the Sassanid monarchy:

The first task is to attack the composition of the Qur'an and denounce its inconsistencies.... If anyone in his presence acknowledges the pre-eminence of the Companions of the Prophet he pulls a grimace, and turns his back when their merits are extolled.... And then he straight away interrupts the conversation to speak of the policies of Ardashir Papagan, the administration of Anushirvan, and the admirable way the country was run under the Sasanians.... (Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran, Hurst & Company, London, 2007, (p. 82).

The ultimate solution to such conflicts was synthesis, but the Shu'ubiyya provided the Persians a sense of self-confidence and tried to preserve the pre-Islamic culture as leading to a synthesis.

Like the religious controversies of the time, such as about free will and about the nature of the Qur'an the Shu'ubiyya was a sign of conflict, change and self-assertion.