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Hugh Kennedy SOAS University of London

The Origins of the Aghlabids.

This paper has a simple objective, to investigate how the Aghlabids, a comparatively obscure family of Arab descent but based in North East Iran at the time of the Abbasid Revolution of 747-50 came to be the first independent Muslim rulers of Ifriqiya.¹ In order to do this, we have to look back at the history of the Muslim occupation of the area. We will consider the evolution of independence and what it meant and how the Aghlabid family were able to assert their authority over the process and became, by the death of the third amir Ziyādat Allah in 223/838, the effective rulers of a self-governing Muslim polity.

The history of Ifriqiya between the Abbasid Revolution of 750 and the emergence of the Aghlabid emirate is a confusing and in many ways, unedifying story.² Warfare against the Khariji rebels and constant insurrections of the *jund* who

¹ Ifriqiya, derived, of course from the Latin Africa, is the name given by the Arabic sources to the lands of modern Tunisia, western Libya, including Tripoli, and parts of eastern Algeria.

² The main Arabic narrative source for Ifriqiya in the early Abbasid period is Ibn Idhārī al-Marrākushi (d. after 712/1310) *Kitāb bayāb al-mughrib* ed. G. S. Colin and E. Levi-Provencal, which gives us a bare chronological narrative. Throughout this paper, I have relied on Ibn Idhārī's careful chronology for the dates of appointments and dismissal of governors and other important events. The history of Ifriqiya is covered in vol.1 (Leiden, Brill, 1948). Also of use is the *Ḥullat al-siyarā'* of Ibn al-Abbār (d. 658/1260) which gives us short biographies of notable figures in the history of the province ed. Hussain Mones (Cairo, 1963). Although compiled many centuries after the events, both works preserve material from much earlier works. The great annalist of the eastern Islamic world, Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk* ed. M. J. de Goeje et al. (3 series, Leiden, Brill, 1879-1901) really only mentions Ifriqiya when figures from the 'Abbasid court, like Harthama b. Ayan are involved. On the other hand, Aḥmad b. Yahya al-Balādhuri gives a short but very interesting account of the rise of the Aghlabids which has the merit of being composed within a century of the events (al-Balādhuri, *Futūḥ al-Buldān* ed M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, Brill, 1866), 233-4 at a time when the aghlabids were still ruling Ifriqiya.

The secondary sources for this period of the history of Ifriqiya are very meager. The main account, Talbi, Mohamed, *L'Emirat Aghlabide: histoire politique*. (Paris, 1966) is dated but basically reliable. See also Brett, M. and Fentress, E., *The Berbers* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1996). For the most recent account with full bibliography, E. Manzano, "The Iberian Peninsula and North Africa" in *New Cambridge History of Islam* (Cambridge, 2010) I, 581-622

were supposed to uphold Abbasid rule in the province dominate the sparse historical narratives on which we depend for understanding the course of these complex events. The problems of governing the province were intractable and in many ways it is surprising, not that the caliphs abandoned it but rather that they held on to it for so long. The first of these problems was the continuing resistance of the native Berber populations to Arab and Caliphal rule. This took the form of repeated Khariji rebellions, normally confined to the mountainous and desert margins of the province but sometimes penetrating to the centre of the province in the fertile lands around Qayrawan and Tunis. The Abbasids, notably the caliph al-Manṣūr, committed a huge amount in both men and money to maintain caliphal rule. The second major problem was that the *jund* who were sent from the East to contain the threat from the Berbers, needed to be paid on a regular basis and the resources of the province simply could not provide for the salaries of this large military establishment. This could only be done with financial subsidy from Egypt which could not always be guaranteed. The governors appointed by the caliphs were in an extremely difficult position. They were caught between the need to defend the province against the Kharijis, the even more pressing need to pay the *jund* and the increasing reluctance of the Baghdad government to provide the necessary financial support. Only a governor like Yazīd b. Ḥātim al-Muhallabi , with his resources of commercial and kinship links, could square the circle for a while. In the end the Aghlabids were able to establish and maintain their independent power because they were themselves scions of the *jund* but also because the caliphs in Baghdad and Samarra, and their governors in Egypt, apparently abandoned the province after the death of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd in 809. Even then Aghlabid rule was challenged by the disaffected *jund* and the

Aghlabids were only saved by the opening of the conquest of Sicily and the additional resources and opportunities that provided.

The origins of the Aghlabids were fairly obscure. The unusual name Aghlab seems to mean thick-necked in the sense of proud or strong. It is also one of the many Arabic words for lion, lions having thick necks. They claimed to be descendants of the great tribe of Tamīm of north-eastern Arabia and had probably settled in the Iraqi garrison cities, either Kufa or Basra, after the first Arab conquests. From there they moved on to the expanding frontier in Khurasan and are said to have established themselves at the small town of Marv al-Rud, now on the north western frontier of Afghanistan. Again like many families of similar origin, they joined the armies of the Abbasid revolution but they were not among the highest ranking *quwwād* (army commanders) and we hear nothing of them during the campaigns which brought the dynasty to power. Al-Aghlab was probably recruited into the guard of the caliph al-Manṣūr. According to Maghribi sources ³, he was one of the men who murdered Abū Muslim on the caliph's orders but al-Ṭabarī and the other eastern sources know nothing of this. It was natural that a man of his origins and status would join the *jund* recruited by Muḥammad b. al-Ash'ath to establish Abbasid rule over Ifriqiya.

The initial Muslim conquest had begun in 642 but proceeded sporadically until the final conquest of Carthage from the Byzantines in 698-9.⁴ The defeat of the Byzantines, however, did not bring peace. Far from it: the plains of Tunisia, always the most densely settled and urbanised parts of the Maghreb, were bordered on the West and South by more arid and mountainous areas. Many of the people of these lands were Berbers living nomad or transhumant lives and grouped in a number of

³ Ibn al-Abbār, *Hulla*, 68-9

⁴ On this see W. Kaegi, *Muslim Expansion and Byzantine Collapse in North Africa* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2010) and H. Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007), 200-224

tribes. They were determined to maintain their independence, a determination which must have been made all the fiercer by the fact that the Muslim presence was characterised by large scale slave raiding. The Arabic sources are clear and unapologetic about this: it was all part of God's bounty to the Muslims. Berber women were especially highly sought after by elite families in the Islamic Middle East. It is worth remembering that both the mother of 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Mu'āwiya, first Umayyad ruler of al-Andalus (756-788) and the second 'Abbasid caliph al-Manṣūr (754-775) were Berbers. In the case of 'Abd al-Raḥmān there can be little doubt that this maternal connection was one of the reasons why he chose to flee to the West and secured protection when most of the rest of his family were destroyed by the victorious Abbasids. Al-Manṣūr may well have maintained contacts with groups in his mother's homeland and he is said to have been knowledgeable about Ifrīqīya and only sent members of his elite (*khāssa*) as governors of the province.⁵ It may be that this this was one of the reasons why he was prepared to invest considerable military resources in to assert Abbasid control over the area in defiance of military and, especially, financial logic.

Berber resistance to Arab rule continued throughout the Umayyad period, with major revolts in 697-8, led by the famous and mysterious Kāhina, and 740-1. This second rebellion almost resulted in the complete destruction of Arab rule, despite the despatch of a very large Syrian army by the Umayyad Caliph Hishām .

The period from 735 onwards saw another element in this complex scene. The Kharijite sect had emerged in the decades which followed the first Muslim conquests in Iraq and Iran as protest movement of Arab Muslims against the domination of the state by a privileged elite and against enforced sedentarisation and the payment of

⁵ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 78

taxes. The movements were strongest at first in southern Iran and the environment of the great port city of Basra in southern Iraq. The most militant group, the Azāriqa, were effectively destroyed by Umayyad forces led by al-Muhallab b. Abī Sufra al-Azdi (d.702) but other groups, notably the Sufriya and the Ibadiya survived by dispersing and finding support in outlying and marginal areas, like Uman, where the Ibadiya are still an important element in the population, and some of the Berber areas of North Africa. With their rejection of the Quraysh elite and their resistance to compulsory taxation and tribute. Khariji ideology appealed to many of the Berbers who adopted it as a separate and distinctive Muslim identity. Despite the origins of Kharijism in the thoroughly Arab milieu of early Islamic Basra, the sources make it clear that the vast majority of the adherents of the sect in the Maghreb were Berbers, living in tribal groups on the mountain areas which surrounded the plains of Tunisia. They were to be the most formidable of the enemies of caliphal power in the area but we know little about their society or organization. The Arabic sources only give us the names of tribes or leaders of major revolts. They are the other, with almost no individual identities or speaking parts in the narratives.

At the time of the Abbasid revolution of 132/750 the settled areas of central Ifriqiya were under the authority of a semi-independent governor, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ḥabīb al-Fihri, scion of a Qurashi family and a direct descendant of ‘Uqba b. Nāfi‘ who had played such an important role in the initial Muslim conquests of the Maghreb. He was assassinated by his son in 755 and in the ensuing mayhem the Khariji Berbers took advantage of the situation. In 758 the Ibadi tribes of Nafusa and Hawwara from the lands south of Tripoli, under the leadership of their Imam Abū’l-Khaṭṭāb, took Qayrawan itself. While Abū’l-Khaṭṭāb remained in Tripoli, Qayrawan was ruled by an associate of his, a man of Iranian origin, called ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b.

Rustam. It seemed as if the Arab conquest was completely reversed and that the Maghreb would be ruled by Berber speaking Ibadis, separate from and fundamentally antagonistic to, the eastern Caliphate.

At this critical juncture, however, al-Manşūr decided to take firm military action. According to one source, the initiative for this action came from a group of the “Arabs of Ifriqiya”, presumably descendants of those soldiers who had come to the province in Umayyad times, sent a delegation to the Caliph to request his support against the Berbers.⁶ He responded by sending a vast *jund*, an army of some 40,000 men⁷ led by twenty eight *quwwād*,⁸ under the command of Muhammad b. al-Ash‘ath al-Khuzā‘ī. Ibn al-Ash‘ath, like many of the leaders of the Abbasid military, was of Arab descent but his family had settled in Khurasan, the north-eastern province of Iran. His troops too were largely drawn from Khurasan and it was natural that Aghlab b. Sālim al-Tamīmī should join them as one of the *quwwād*. Abū’l-Khaṭṭāb and his Khariji followers were defeated and Ibn al-Ash‘ath was established as governor in Qayrawan, which was fortified for the first time and which, along with the new coastal town of Tunis, formed the core of the province. Ibn al-Aghlab was sent to remote Tubna in the Zab where he could keep an eye on the Berbers of the Aures mountains and the desert frontier.

This expedition represented an enormous commitment of men and resources. The total number of salaried soldiers in the Abbasid army was probably no more than 150,000 at the most and many of these were tied up in local garrison duties. When al-Manşūr, was faced with the major rebellion of the Alid Muḥammad “the Pure Soul” in Medina and his brother Ibrāhīm in Basra in 762, he had only a thousand men with

⁶ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 72

⁷ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 72. Bal.232 says 70,000 or 40,000

⁸ *quwwād* (sing. *qā'id*) was the name given to military commanders in the Abbasid army who led, and in many cases, recruited the soldiers. See H. Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs*

him in his newly founded capital of Baghdad. Another 30,000 were with his son Muḥammad al-Mahdī in Rayy in Central Iran but the largest force in the Abbasid army were the 40,000 sent with Ibn al-Ash‘ath in Tunisia.⁹

These troops and their descendants, known collectively as the *jund* were to be the dominant military force in Ifriqiya for the next century and determined much of the political life of the province. At one level, they were fairly successful. They did protect Qayrawan and the plains more or less effectively, from the Khariji Berbers but at a price. The Abbasid army was a professional force. They were paid salaries (‘*aṭā*) by the state in coined money every month. The actual amount of these salaries is not exactly clear but sources suggest that 60 *dirham* or 720 a year.¹⁰ If 40,000 men were receiving this sort of pay, the maintenance of the *jund* would amount to 28,800,000 *dirham* per year. This was at a time when the tax yield of Egypt, the most valuable province of the Caliphate after Iraq was 1,920,000 gold *dinar*, equivalent to 42,240,000 *dirham*. The same source says that the revenues of Ifriqiya amounted to just 13,000,000 *dirham* and “one hundred at twenty carpets”.¹¹ The *jund* of Ifriqiya, like the other units, were garrisoned in the major towns, Qayrawan and Tunis and smaller towns like Mila and Al-Urbus in the Jebel and Tubna in the Zab. They seem to have been city based and they were not dispersed in the countryside. They did not become landowners or famers or herdsmen. They were totally dependent on the ‘*aṭā* for their livelihoods and would take violent action if necessary to ensure that they were paid.

⁹ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, III, 304-5: H. Kennedy, *The Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 77 for a discussion of the total numbers.

¹⁰ H. Kennedy, “Military pay and the economy of the early Islamic state” *Historical Research*, 75 (2002), 157-169

¹¹ The figures are taken from the account of the revenues of the Caliphate during the reign of al-Rashīd (786-809) given in al-Jahshiyārī, *Kitāb al-wuzarā* ed. M. El-Sakka et al. (Cairo, 1938), 281-8.

It was normally accepted in Abbasid fiscal practice that the expenses of the local military would be paid from the revenues of the province in which they were stationed and that the surplus would be sent to the capital in Baghdad. However, as we have seen, the military establishment in Ifrīqiya was very large, vastly greater than could be maintained in the resources generated by local tax revenues. There is some indication that revenues from Egypt were sent to Qayrawan to try to meet the deficit but this was often problematic, especially when the financial administration of the caliphate was controlled by administrators like the famous Barmakid family who were intent on ensuring that the centre received its share.¹²

The *jund* of Ifriqiya were not a homogenous force. They came in two major waves, with Muḥammad b. al-Ash‘ath and later, in 771, with Yazīd b. Ḥātim al-Muhallabi who is said to have arrived with 60,000 more men which no doubt helped to keep the Berbers at bay but certainly increased the fiscal burden. They came from different regional armies in the east. The majority were almost certainly Khurasanis but there were also substantial numbers of Syrians as well. We hear of troops from the *junds* (in this context, the districts into which Syria was divided for administrative purposes) of Damascus and Hims settled in particular areas, the *jund* of Damascus in al-Urbus and that of Hims in Mīla, a process we can also observe in the early settlement of Muslim forces in al-Andalus where different units settled in their own areas. The leaders of the *jund* in the eighth and the beginning of the ninth century almost all bear Arab names and tribal *nisbas*, though many of them must have been of Iranian descent. Forces of the *jund* were settled in Qayrawan and Tunis, where an arsenal, *Dār al-ṣinā‘a* was established by the end of the century. There were also

¹² See al-Balādhuri, *Futūḥ*, 234 who narrates that Ibrahim b. al-Aghlab, at the beginning of his rule was only saved from the wrath of the *jund*, who demanded their *arzāq* when money was brought to him from the revenues of Egypt.

units in Tripoli, Tubna, the capital of the Zab region, in Mila, where the *jund* led by Mālik b. al-Mundhir al-Kalbī were stationed in 179/795¹³ and al-Urbus. Rivalries between the *jund* settled in Qayrawan and Tunis were yet another source of division. All the smaller centres of the *jund*, Tobna, al-Urbus (Laribus) and Mila (Milev) had been Byzantine garrison towns and were still protected by their Byzantine walls.

This stressful economic position was the cause of many of the upheavals and problems which faced the Abbasid governors and which, ultimately, gave the Aghlabid family their opportunity.

At the time of the first Abbasid expedition to Ifriqiya, things in the province were very dismal for the Arab Muslim settlers in Qayrawan and the surrounding areas. In 140/757-8, the city had been taken and burned by the Sufriya Kharijis who were in turn, driven out by the Ibadis under their formidable leader Abū 'l-Khaṭṭāb. As we have seen, in 761 the Abbasid army led by Muḥammad b. al-Ash'ath arrived and recovered Qayrawan where Muhammad was installed as governor, while al-Aghlab b. Sālim, who had come with him, took over the remote but strategically important town of Tubna. Successive Berber armies were defeated and forced to retreat to their mountainous homelands and the head of Abū'l-Khaṭṭāb was sent in triumph to Baghdad. The new governor set about building walls for Qayrawan, at exactly the same time, Ibn Idhari notes, that al-Manṣūr was building the walls of Baghdad and "he took a firm grip (*dabaṭa*) on Ifriqiya and its districts (*a 'māl*)".¹⁴ He defeated the Ibadis of Zuwayla and in 762, surprisingly, "he calmed the situation of Ifriqiya and there was no movement (*ḥaraka*) against him".

¹³ Ibn al-Abbar, *Hulla*, 84

¹⁴ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 72

The apparent peace did not last for long. By 765 relations between the *jund* and their commander Ibn al-Ash‘ath had broken down completely and he was driven out, without bloodshed,¹⁵ by a military mutiny led by one of his *quwwād*, ‘Īsā b. Mūsā b. ‘Ajlān. He was supported by “some of the Arabs¹⁶ and the *jund*” but he had no appointment (‘*ahd*) from the caliph and no consent (*tarādin*) from the general populace (‘*āmmah*).¹⁷ This mutiny was the first of many in which the *jund* confronted the governors. We are rarely told the reasons for their apparently contrary attitudes but they were almost certainly financial.

The debacle of this first period of Aghlabid rule was followed by a long period of domination by the Muhallabi family (771-793), one of whose members Yazīd b. Ḥātim, provided the longest period of tranquillity in the history of Ifriqiya in the eighth century. To understand why this should be so, certain features of the history of this remarkable family should be noted. The Muhallabis came from the tribe of Azd who were mostly located in pre-Islamic times in Uman at the south east of the Arabian peninsula. In the aftermath of the first Muslim conquests, they established themselves in Basra where Muhallab b. Abī Ṣufra distinguished himself by leading the armies of Basra against the Kharijites, notably the fierce and blood-thirsty Azraqites. The Basra connection was important in two distinct ways. Firstly, Basra was the centre of the development of Kharijism in the early Umayyad period. Despite al-Muhallab’s campaigns against the extremist Azraqites, relations between the Muhallabis and other Kharijite groups like the Sufriya and the Ibadiya were peaceful, even friendly.¹⁸ ‘Ātika, sister of the second great leader of the family, Yazīd b. al-

¹⁵ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 73, says “they asked him to leave”.

¹⁶ Though it is not entirely clear, this probably refers to Arabs who had settled in the province before the arrival of the *jund*.

¹⁷ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 73

¹⁸ For these connections see T. Lewicki, “al-Ibāḍiyya” in EI 2 sv.

Muhallab, was a fervent supporter of the Ibadiya in Basra. Although it is never explicitly stated in the texts, the fact that the Sufriya and Ibadiya, who had been so militantly hostile to Arab and Abbasid rule before hardly caused any disturbances during the governorate of Yazīd b. Ḥātim, must surely be connected with the good relations which had been established in Basra.

The second, and connected, factor was, of course, that Basra was a great trading centre and the Kharijis, especially the Ibadis developed strong trading networks. These networks stretched from Basra west into the Maghreb but also east to Sind, which has been conquered, at least to some extent from 712 onwards. Again, the texts do not spell it out but the fact that the Muhallabis had interests in Sind and, for example the fact that the first Muhallabi governor, ‘Amr b. Ḥafṣ, transferred directly from the governorate of Sind to that of Ifriqiya, from Multan to Qayrawan, illustrates the breadth of Muhallabi interests and their coincidence with the interests of Ibadi merchants. It was Yazīd b. Ḥātim who “organized the suqs of Qayrawan and put each trade in its place”¹⁹ and it seems likely that part of the arrangement between the Kharijites and the Muhallabis was that the former should have access to these new markets. As Dr Johnson observed, “men are seldom so innocently employed as when they are making money” and the long years of peace may have been a result of this planning.

Muhallabi rule was established by Yazīd b. Ḥātim. Described as a member of the caliph al-Manṣūr’s inner circle (*khāṣṣ*) he had already served as governor Armenia, Sind, Azerbaijan and Egypt. Like his famous grandfather, Muhallab b. Abī Ṣufra, he was well known for his for his generosity and, determination and perspicacity, duly celebrated by the poets of the time, even those who had never met

¹⁹ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 78

him or seen him.²⁰ He also benefitted from the support of his numerous family (al-Muhallab is said to have had over three hundred children, male and female) many of whom served him in subordinate positions. Nonetheless Muhallabi rule was established by a mighty influx of military power. Yazīd b. Ḥātim brought with him an army said to have numbered 60,000 men from Syria, Iraq and Khurasan. Al-Ṭabari says that al-Manṣūr spent the vast sum of 63,000,000 *dirham* on the army.²¹ They first stopped in Tripoli where Abū Ḥātim the Kharijite leader was defeated and killed. The army then moved on to Qayrawan and Yazīd established himself in 772.²² The next year he sent a relative of his, al-‘Alā b. Sa‘īd al-Muhallabi to take over Tubna and the Zab.²³

He also consolidated his rule in the capital. In 774-5 he renewed the building (*jaddada binā’*) of the great mosque in Qayrawan. It is also in this period that we can see the growing influence of the proto-Maliki judges of Qayrawan. When the qadi ‘Abd Allah b. Ziyād died in 778-9, apparently after eating a dish of fish and yoghurt at the governor’s table, there was a huge crowd at his funeral and Yazīd himself led the mourners.

Yazīd died in Ramadan 171/February 788 having remained in power from the caliphate of al-Manṣūr, through the reigns of al-Mahdi and al-Hadi into the beginning of the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd.²⁴ It was a hard act to follow. As soon as he was dead, another rebellion was raised by the Ibadis in the Jabal Baja which was only put down with difficulty. Nonetheless Muhallabi rule survived in the person of his elder brother, Rawḥ b. Ḥātim, described as a dozy and senile old man.²⁵

²⁰ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 81

²¹ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 78-82

²² al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, III, 373

²³ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 79

²⁴ al-Ṭabarī, III, *Ta’rīkh*, 569

²⁵ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 84-5

An interesting illustration of the powerful connections which still existed between the Abbasid authorities in Iraq and Ifriqiya can be seen in the story of the appointment of Naṣr b. Ḥabīb al-Muhallabi as governor in 791. When it was apparent that Rawḥ b. Ḥātim was declining, Naṣr b. Ḥabīb and the qa'id Abū'l-'Anbar wrote to al-Rashid saying how worried they were "because Ifriqiya is a large frontier zone (*thughr kabīr*) which would not be safe without a strong ruler (*bi gahyri sulṭān*)".²⁶ Naṣr had been *ṣāhib al-shurṭa* to Yazīd b. Ḥātim in Egypt and Ifriqiya so al-Rashīd wrote to him secretly appointing him as governor. When Rawḥ eventually died, the oath of allegiance was taken to his son Qabīsa by the people gathered in the mosque of Qayrawan. Meanwhile Abū'l-'Anbar and the *ṣāhib al-barīd* went to Naṣr with al-Rashīd's *'ahd* (document of appointment) and they rode with him to the mosque where they found Qabīsa sitting on the *farāsh* (cushion). They made him get up and Naṣr to sit in his place and told the people (*al-nās*) what the position was. They read out Rashīd's letter and the people "heard and obeyed" and accepted their new ruler.

Muhallabid rule was brought to an end by the *jund*. In 793 for reasons which are not explained, al-Rashid wrote to depose Naṣr and appoint another Muhallabi, Faḍl b. Rawḥ who was then governor of the Zab. Installed in Qayrawan, he then appointed his nephew al-Mughīra as governor in Tunis. He was a man without experience or political awareness (*siyāsa*)²⁷ and he aroused the anger of the *jund* who, under the leadership of one Abū'l-Jarud besieged him in the *dār al-imāra* (government house) of the city and eventually drove him out to Qayrawan. There was a long standoff which resulted in the death of the governor Rawḥ at the hands of the

²⁶ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 85

²⁷ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 86

jund. The upshot was that Abū'l-Jarud, now effectively in control wrote to the caliph al-Rashīd who pardoned him and appointed him as governor.²⁸

The *dawla*²⁹ of the Muhallabis in Ifriqiya had come to an end after twenty three years. As Talbi points out, although authority passed from one family member to another, the succession was controlled by the caliphal administration. Son was never allowed to succeed father, as Qabīsa had found out when he was humiliated in the mosque at Qayrawan. On the other hand, the caliphal government could not control Ifriqiya without an individual or family who could attract the respect of the *jund* and knew how to manage them.

For the next decade or so, the Baghdad government tried, unsuccessfully to find a replacement for the Muhallabis. Now the caliph was granting not just a pardon but the office of governor to a man, Abu'l-Jarud who had just been responsible for the death of the man, Rawh, whom he had just appointed.

The next few years saw the caliphal government trying various strategies to solve the problem of governing Ifriqiya. The first was the appointment of a man from the heart of the caliphal administration to take charge. Harthama b. A'yan, who arrived in the province in June 795, was one of al-Rashīd's most trusted advisers and operatives. As far as we know, he had no previous experience of the province and brought with him only a small (*kathīf*) army. He is said to have treated the people well and made overtures to the Berbers. He built the famous ribat at Munastir, probably to provide a base where he could defend himself against the unruly *jund*,³⁰ but "when he saw what he saw of the conflict in Ifriqiya, the disobedience of its people, he sought

²⁸ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 86-8

²⁹ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 88

³⁰ Circumstances suggest that this is a more likely explanation for the founding of this building than defence from Byzantine raids.

to be excused and al-Rashīd wrote to him giving him permission to return to the East” and he left in October 797.³¹

Despite this rebuff, Harun and the Barmakids still seems to have believed that Ifriqiya could be governed like any other province. The centralising tendencies of Barmakid administration left little scope for accommodation with local interests; provincial elites were increasingly excluded from power in their provinces. After Harthama’s retirement, they appointed Muḥammad b. Muqātil al-‘Akki. He comes across in the sources as a gilded youth from the heart of the caliphal court, but a man with neither experience nor judgment and, possibly, a man with little enthusiasm for the arduous work of governing troublesome provinces. “This Muḥammad” Ibn Idhari notes tartly, “was a man with no praiseworthy conduct”.³² His main claim to fame was that his father was one of the great men of the ‘Abbasid *dawla* he was a milk-brother (*radī‘*) of the caliph, a distinction he shared with Ja‘far the Barmakid.³³ He had, as far as we can tell no experience in or contacts with the province before his appointment.

He aroused popular hostility by having Bahlūl b. Rāshid, the leading religious figure of the time, flogged and imprisoned so that he died. More dangerously, he reduced the wages (*arzāq*) of the *jund*, perhaps on the orders of his Barmakid masters, and oppressed the people. This united both the Khurasanis and the Syrians in the *jund* who rebelled under the leadership of Tammām b. Tamīm al-Tamīmī, the financial administrator (‘*āmil*) of Tunis. The united *jund* defeated the governor’s army and besieged him in his house (he had apparently left the official residence,) the *Dār al-*

³¹ For Harthama’s rule in Ifriqiya, al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, III, 142, 645

³² Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 88

³³ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 89. His relationship with al-Rashīd and the Barmakids is discussed at some length in Talbi, 82-5

Imāra. An *aman* was arranged, allowing Muḥammad to leave with his family and his property and establish himself in Tripoli.³⁴

Tammām now became governor of Ifriqiyya but he was, as Ibn Idhari notes, a usurper (*mutaghallib*), without any deed of appointment (*‘ahd*) from al-Rashīd.³⁵ Subsequent events were to show how important this was, despite the apparent weakness the caliphal government. It was this lack of legitimacy which gave Ibrāhīm b.al-Aghlab his chance. He was at this time governor of the Zab, as his father had been before him, and we must think that the area was something of a power base for the family. He rushed to Qayrawan and, while Tammām retired to Tunis, he went to the great mosque and ascended the minbar³⁶. He was, we are told, a man of great eloquence and he used this to tell the assembled people that he had only come to support Muḥammad and assert the cause of Abbasid legitimacy. He wrote to Muḥammad explaining what he had done and inviting him to return. That this played well with at least some elements of the population is suggested by an anecdote which has in walking in one of the alleys and hearing a woman in one of the vaulted passages (*tāq*) shouting at him “I give thanks for he has restored to you the role (*mulk*) of Ifriqiya”.³⁷

There then followed a period of three point negotiations, with Tammām, from his base in Tunis, trying to convince Muḥammad that Ibrāhīm was only seeking his destruction. Ibn Muqātil, however, found Ibn al-Aghlab a more convincing ally and stuck with him. So Tammām led a great army (*‘askar ‘adhīm*) from Tunis against Qayrawan. When this was defeated, Ibn al-Aghlab led a counter-attack on Tunis and

³⁴ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 90

³⁵ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 90

³⁶ It is interesting to note that possession of the great mosque was a sign of control, much more than possession of the *Dār al-Imāra*.

³⁷ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 90

forced Tammām to seek an *aman* which was duly granted. If the tangled events of this period tell us anything about the structures of power it is that caliphal legitimacy was a powerful factor. Tammām’s status as a usurper without an *‘ahd* played a major part in his defeat. Ibn al-Aghlab came to power, not as a separatist rebels trying to set up an independent regime for himself but as, at least in public discourse, a loyal servant of the Abbasid *dawla* intent on restoring legitimate government.

It was against this background that the caliph sent a letter dismissing Ibn al-Akkī as governor and sending Ibrahim an *‘ahd* as governor of Ifriqiyya. According to al-Balādhurī, our earliest source, al-Rashid asked Harthama, by now returned to the east, who he would recommend to replace al-‘Akkī and it was he who recommended Ibrahim.³⁸ The letter of appointment arrived in the middle of Jumada II, 184/June, 800 and this can be said to mark the beginning of Aghlabid rule in the province but not of the independence of Ifriqiyya from Abbasid rule. The sources wax lyrical about Ibrahim’s talents as warrior, orator and judge, not surprising given that fact that the chronicles on which our sources depend were largely compiled during the rule of his descendants. He seems to have been largely accepted by the *jund* and was on good terms with the Berbers. He also began consolidating his authority by building a new palace enclosure, later known as the Qaṣr al-qadīm about three miles from Qayrawan. He moved the Dār al-Imāra there and secretly moved his arms and military supplies there and settled his slaves and the people he trusted around it.³⁹

Al-Baladhuri gives a slightly more extended description: “Ibrahim built the White Palace (*qaṣr al-abyaḍ*) two miles south of Qayrawan, gave the people plots of land around it and made it a *miṣr* and built a Friday Mosque with plaster and baked

³⁸ al-Balādhuri, *Futūḥ* 232

³⁹ Ibn Idhari, *Bayān*, I, 92-3

brick and furnished it marble columns and a cedar roof, making it two hundred cubits square. He bought slaves and freed them, 5,000 in number and settled them around it. He called the city Abbasiya and it is still populated and flourishing to this day”.⁴⁰

But Ibrahim was no more immune from disturbances caused by the *jund* than his predecessors had been. He faced two major revolts, those of Ḥamdīs b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kindī in 186/802 and ‘Imrān b. al-Muqallad in 194/809. In both cases he was able to defend himself from his new base in the Qasr with the help of his slave soldiers (*‘abīd* never *ghilmān* or *mamālīk* in the sources). It would be interesting to know more about these but we have no indication about their origins or their skills and training. It is interesting that he was doing this a decade before the young Abbasid prince, Abū Ishāq b. Hārūn al-Rashīd, later the caliph al-Mu‘taṣim began recruiting the slave soldiers in Baghdad, a small private army which enabled him to seize power after the death of his brother al-Ma’mūn in 833.

When Ibrāhīm died in Shawwāl 196/July 812 he was succeeded by his son ‘Abd Allāh. His short and unhappy reign ended with his death from natural causes in Dhū’l-Hijja 197/June 817 and he was succeeded by his younger brother Ziyādat Allah who was in many ways the second founder of the Aghlabid regime.

Before discussing his rule, however, it is interesting to look at the mechanism of succession in the family. Neither ‘Abd Allah nor Ziyādat Allah seem to have had the *‘ahd* of the caliph which had proved so crucial to the success of Ibrahim in seizing and retaining power. The reason for this was the crisis in the caliphate which essentially paralysed the caliphal administration. After the death of al-Rashīd there was a growing hostility between his two sons and heirs, al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn which irrupted in open hostility in 195/810-11. In fact the successions occurred

⁴⁰ al-Balādhuri, *Futūḥ* 234

exactly at the time when the political and military leaders in Baghdad and Fustat (Egypt) were entirely preoccupied by the huge conflict between the brothers. Even if they had wished, they were in no position to assert caliphal influence over the succession as al-Manṣūr and his successors had over the Muḥallabi succession half a century before.

At the time of Ibrāhīm's death, the Aghlabid family were still very much part of the elite of the Abbasid caliphate. When in 196/812 the caliph al-Amīn retreated to the Round City in Baghdad in his final resistance to the attacks of his brother's general Ṭāhir he had among his few remaining supporters Ibrāhīm's son Muḥammad, called in al-Ṭabari's account, al-Ifrīqī.⁴¹ While the desperate caliph hesitated about what to do, Muḥammad made a radical suggestion; "Your position and ours have come to what you see. We (Muḥammad was acting in concert with a local Baghdad commander) have formed a plan which we submit to you. Consider it and make up your mind, for we hope it will be right, and that God will make it prosper, if He will" "What is it?" he asked. "The men have scattered from you and the foe has encircled you on every side. Of your cavalry, 1.000 horses, the best and swiftest of them, remain with you. We think you should choose 700 of the *abnā*⁴², men whom we know to love you. We will mount them on these horses and make a sortie by night from one of the gates (of the Round City) for 'the night belongs to its people' and no one will stand firm against us, God willing. We will go out until we reach al-Jazira and Syria. You will raise troops and gather taxes and will you will be a large kingdom (*mamlaka*) and a new domain (*mulk*). People will rally to you and the (enemy) soldiers will be prevented from pursuing you". After initially agreeing, al-Amin

⁴¹ al-Ṭabari, *Ta'riḫh*, III, 911-2. He must also be the al-Ifrīqī mentioned on p. 954

⁴² lit. "sons", the name given to the descendants of those Khurasani troops who put the Abbasids in power in 750 and who had settled in Baghdad

rejected this advice because other courtiers were threatened by Ṭāhir with the loss of all their property if the plan went ahead. Muḥammad, of course, was immune from such pressure as his estates lay far to the west in Ifriqiya, well out of the range of Ṭāhir and his men. The failure of this initiative meant the final end of the Aghlabid family's presence at the court of the Caliphs and from this time, their activities were confined to the Maghreb.

Whether the words quoted were actually spoken or not is, of course, impossible to say but it certainly reflects one of the options open to the cornered caliph, but more importantly from our point of view, it shows how the Aghlabids were still very much part of the caliph's inner circle in Baghdad and closely linked to the *abnā* from whom the Aghlabids themselves had sprung.

The reign of Ziyadat Allah saw the last, and possibly, the greatest confrontation between the Aghlabids and the *jund*. The revolt of the *jund* was led by one Maṣṣūr b. Naṣr al-Tunbudhi who took his *nisba*, not from the Arab tribe from which he could claim descent, but from the fortress near Tunis which he owned and from which he could dominate the route from Tunis to Qayrawan. As before, the proximate cause of the trouble was financial. Ziyādat Allah is said to have been very hard on the *jund*, probably because he could not afford to be generous, and, in the new political circumstances, there was no possibility of financial aid from Egypt which had saved amirs on previous occasions. The revolt began in 209/824 and the rebels soon controlled most of the country apart from Qabes in the south but Ziyādat Allah allied with the Berbers to regain the advantage and Maṣṣūr was captured and executed.

After the defeat of this revolt, the country seems to have become more peaceful and the basic structures of Ifriqiyān politics changed for good. Two factors

were important in this change. The first was that the Khariji Berbers had become less threatening and so the *jund* was not so essential to the survival of Aghlabid Ifriqiya. The fact that the Kutama of the Aures region were now being converted by Shi'ite missionaries did not seem, at this time a real threat. The second was the beginning of the conquest of Sicily. It is no coincidence that Ziyādatallah set this in motion in 211/827, immediately after the defeat of Manṣūr's rebellion. This meant not only was there a new outlet for the martial energies of the *jund* but, more importantly, there were new sources of revenue which could help to solve the cash-flow problems which had plagued Ifriqiyya since the first arrival of the *jund* with Ibn al-Ash'ath.

It is perhaps interesting to consider the reasons why the Aghlabids established an independent dynasty. Since the nineteenth century, if not before, we have come to consider the striving for "national" independence as a natural human aspiration. Empires are intrinsically evil and all good men and true follow the example of the rebels of 1848 in their demands for states of their own. Yet this is not the only model for the disintegration of empires. If we want to understand the Aghlabid process in a comparative historical perspective, we might be better to look at the collapse of the Soviet empire in Central Asia in the early 1990s. In both cases the new rulers were an integral part of the old imperial system and owed their status and advancement to its structures. Ibrāhīm, as we have seen, attained power as a supporter of Abbasid legitimacy against the usurper Tammām b. Tamīm. In both cases, however, the Empire collapsed from the centre, leaving such provincial potentates high and dry. The Caliphate, like the Gorbachev administration, could offer no structure of legitimacy. Neither the new caliph al-Ma'mūn or his successors seem to have made the slightest effort to restore their authority in Ifriqiya or reintegrate into the caliphate. They simply had to invent a new legitimacy of their own devising for no 'ahd would

arrive with the *barīd* to encourage their subjects to take the oath of allegiance. They had independence thrust upon them and had to fend for themselves as best they could.