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The Rise and Fall of the Early ‘Abbāsīd Political and Military Elite

Abstract: This paper explores the composition and role of the military and political elite of the early ‘Abbāsīd caliphate (750–809) whose support enabled the caliphs to maintain sovereignty over their far-flung domains. It considers the importance of different groups, including members of the ‘Abbāsīd family, military commanders from Khurāsān and members of powerful and wealthy families like the Muhallabīs and the Shaybānī tribal chiefs. The paper concludes with a discussion of the reasons for the disappearance and effective extinction of this elite in the years after the great civil war that followed Hārūn al-Rashīd’s death in 809.

Keywords: Caliphs; armies; political power; Syria; Khurāsān

The governance of the early ‘Abbāsīd caliphate was a remarkable political and organizational achievement. For half a century, between the establishment of the dynasty in 132 H/750 CE and the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd in 193 H/809 CE, the area from Tunisia in the west to Sind and Central Asia in the east was governed effectively and largely peacefully from Iraq. From 145 H/762 CE, the city of Baghdad served as the administrative capital, though the distances which separated it from the far-flung provinces were enormous: it is over 2,000 kilometres from Baghdad to Merv, the political centre of the great province of Khurāsān, and 1,500 kilometres from the capital to the Holy City of Mecca.

The *barīd* postal system inherited from the Umayyads and Sasanians was surprisingly effective at communicating urgent messages over these huge distances.¹ When the caliph al-Rashīd died in the year 809 at Ṭūs (near Mashhad in north-east Iran) a messenger brought the news to Baghdad in twelve days, traveling 1,900 kilometres at an average speed of 150 kilometres per day. Similar

I will not be dealing with the bureaucratic elite of the *kuttāb* or the religious elite of the *fuqahā’* and *qādīs* that would require a whole other study. For the general history of early ‘Abbāsīd caliphate, Kennedy 2016; El-Hibri 2010, 269–304; Bennison 2009. For earlier studies of the ‘Abbāsīd elite with full references to sources, Crone 1980, esp. 173–189, and Kennedy 1981/2016, 73–86.

1 On the *barīd* and the distances covered, see Silverstein 2007, 191–193.

speeds are recorded for the reporting of other crucial events. Not until the invention of the electric telegraph in the late 19th century was such swiftness bettered. Information was clearly very important.

Enforcement was much slower. Even without opposition or resistance, armies could travel no more than 20 kilometres a day, and usually managed less. That left plenty of time for a provincial rebellion to gather support and momentum before the forces of central government arrived on the scene. Exercising control and authority over such enormous distances was always going to be difficult, and demands for provincial autonomy were correspondingly hard to resist.

Despite these formidable obstacles the 'Abbāsids maintained their authority and the cohesion of their caliphate for more than half a century. No later Islamic dynasty established the same degree of authority over so wide and diverse an area. The achievement was not the result of absolutist authority, but of the development of a stable political and military elite, or rather a series of elites, which at the same time represented the caliphal government in the provinces and the provinces to the central government in Baghdad.

While this must have been true for all large pre-modern empires in the Middle East from the Achaemenids onwards, one factor that distinguishes the 'Abbāsīd example is the wealth of information that survives in the sources about the government of the caliphate. In al-Ṭabarī's great *Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* (History of the Prophets and Kings),² there are enough details to build up a detailed prosopography of the ruling elite, of their origins, connections, successes and failures. This is supplemented by universal chronicles such as al-Ya'qūbī's *Ta'riḫ* (History),³ and provincial accounts such as al-Kindī's *Kitāb Wulāt Miṣr* (Governors of Egypt)⁴ and al-Azdi's *Ta'riḫ al-Mawṣil* (History of Mosul).⁵

Despite occasional contradictions, we can trace individual families through several generations in the evidence and get a clear idea of their influence. There is perhaps no other period in early Islamic history when so much attention was paid to the appointment of provincial governors and officials far away from the court and capital. It did not last. By the mid-9th century, the caliphate was dominated by the Turkish and eastern Iranian military of Samarra. Hardly any information survives regarding provincial appointments and we cannot reliably trace the names of governors, even of really important cities such as Basra. The care

2 Al-Ṭabarī 1879–1901.

3 Al-Ya'qūbī 1883.

4 Al-Kindī 1912.

5 Al-Azdi 1967.

with which earlier annalists recorded this type of information clearly shows how important these people and the offices they held were then considered to be.

The key to these patterns of provincial power was the office of *wālī*, which is usually translated as governor. The richness of the sources means we can build up a virtually complete *fasti* of the governors of all the major provinces of the caliphate from the 'Abbāsīd revolution to the reign of al-Ma'mūn, though (as is only to be expected) there are some confusions and ambiguities. The identities of the men who held these posts are an invaluable measure of the political complexities of the caliphate. The term *'āmil* was also employed to designate this type of provincial official. The sources sometimes make a distinction between the office of *wālī*, in charge of leading prayers and the people in war, and the *'āmil*, in charge of taxation, but the terms were often used interchangeably and the distinction between the two offices blurred.⁶

If the annals superficially make the caliph appear as a powerful absolute ruler, further down the chain of power the governors display effective executive power over military and civil affairs in the province. These areas are often simply characterised as *ḥarb* and *ṣalāt* (war and prayer), but when sources like al-Kin-dī's history of Egypt allow us to peer below the surface, we find governors in a more complicated situation.⁷ The governors of Egypt were the middle men between the caliph and his government in Baghdad, which was always seeking to extract more tax revenue from this rich province, and the local Muslim elites, who were determined to retain as much of the revenue as possible in the local *dīwān* to pay their salaries and those of their followers. The governors' position was made more precarious in that they were usually outsiders with few Egyptian connections; they had to cooperate with or at least not alienate the *wujūh*, the local Arab Muslim elite. The *wujūh* were led by the *ṣāḥib al-shurṭa*, the chief of police. Unlike the titular governor, the *ṣāḥib al-shurṭa* was always chosen from a small circle of prominent local families and they often served for longer than their ephemeral superiors. At one level this seems a weak system of government, ultimately dependent on the consent of local notables. In reality the system was very resilient: the local Egyptian Muslim elite, who never held office outside their province and seldom left it, were stakeholders in the 'Abbāsīd rule that assured their high status. One of the main reasons for the collapse of the caliphate in the 9th century was the breaking of bonds between Baghdad and local elites by the influx of Turks and eastern Iranians to the top ranks of central government.

⁶ For an overview of the role of provincial governors, see *EP*², "Amir" (A. A. Duri).

⁷ Kennedy 1981, 26–38; Kennedy 1998, 62–85; Mikhail 2014, esp. 136–159.

The provincial elite was largely formed by the political genius of the second ‘Abbāsīd caliph Abū Ja‘far al-Manšūr (136–158 H/754–775 CE). This cadre governed the vast ‘Abbāsīd Empire; its broad-based nature was vital in keeping the caliphate together politically and its disappearance after the great civil war that followed the death of al-Rashīd in 193 H/809 CE was a major factor in the caliphate’s breakup.

It is sometimes easy to forget how exceptional this pre-war period was and how impressive was the political success that kept this multi-ethnic, multi-cultural state together. In what follows, I will investigate some important constituents of the elite of this time to determine the sources of its power and the dynamics of its political operation.

The ‘Abbāsīd family formed an important element in this elite.⁸ The caliph’s numerous uncles, the Banū ‘Alī b. ‘Abdallāh b. al-‘Abbās, and his cousins were appointed to governorates in the western part of the caliphate, notably in Syria, Egypt and the prosperous and peaceful province of southern Iraq (most importantly in the city of Basra). They did not, however, serve in the Iranian provinces; al-Saffāḥ’s brief appointment of one of his uncles as governor of Fārs was abruptly terminated by Abū Muslim.⁹ Nor did they serve in the Caucasus or North Africa, areas likely to see serious military activity and where Khurāsānī soldiers were stationed in large numbers. In some cases these ‘Abbāsīds formed sub-dynasties passing the title of governor from father to son, for example Šāliḥ b. ‘Alī (d. 152 H/769 CE) and his sons al-Faḍl (d. after 163 H/780 CE) and ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 196 H/811–12 CE) in Syria, and Sulaymān b. ‘Alī (d. 142 H/759–60 CE) and his son Muḥammad (d. 173 H/789 CE) in Basra.

The granting of these prominent roles assured the loyalty of the wider ‘Abbāsīd family to the ruling branch of the dynasty, discouraging internecine rebellion or usurpation. Governors also provided a focus of dynastic loyalty for the people of the provinces. This is especially clear in the case of Syria. Many elements in this large and potentially turbulent province found themselves excluded from positions in the army with the end of Umayyad rule, but the patronage of Šāliḥ and his sons assured the continuing loyalty of at least some of them to the ‘Abbāsīds. This was made very clear during the short reign of al-Amīn, when ‘Abd al-Malik b. Šāliḥ was able to recruit large numbers of Syrians to support the caliph against the eastern Iranian armies of his brother al-Ma’mūn.¹⁰

⁸ This section expands on Kennedy 1981/2016, 73–95, where I first began to investigate the elite of the early ‘Abbāsīd caliphate.

⁹ Al-Ṭabarī 1879–1901, iii, 71–72.

¹⁰ Al-Ṭabarī 1879–1901, iii, 841–845.

Members of the 'Abbāsīd family were also wealthy property owners; for example, Ṣāliḥ b. 'Alī, who took over most of the extensive property in northern Syria developed by Maslama b. 'Abd al-Malik and other Umayyad princes. This meant that even when they held no formal government position, the 'Abbāsīds retained influence in their provinces. Although they visited the caliphal court in Baghdad, it seems that they resided in their own districts most of the time.

It is clear that al-Rashīd, or rather his Barmakid mentors, sought to undermine the power of these sub-dynasties. Upon Muḥammad b. Sulaymān's death in Basra, his house and vast fortune were confiscated by the caliph. Neither his brother Ja'far or any children he may have had were allowed to inherit his position in the city. Similarly, 'Abd al-Malik b. Ṣāliḥ spent the last six years of Hārūn's reign in prison because the caliph was apprehensive about the power he wielded in Syria. Members of the family were still property owners in comfortable circumstances but their place in the political elite was greatly diminished. After the death of 'Abd al-Malik b. Ṣāliḥ in 195 H/811 CE no 'Abbāsīd remained who could rally the Syrians to the support of the caliph as he and his father had been able to.

During the 3rd century H/9th century CE, the role of the 'Abbāsīd family was greatly restricted. No members of the dynasty governed provinces or commanded armies except for the caliph, those of his children designated as heirs, and occasionally a brother—as in the case of al-Muwaffaq, brother of the caliph al-Mu'tamid (r. 256–279 H/870–892 CE) and leader of the campaign against the Zanj in southern Iraq. With these changes, the ruling dynasty became disconnected from the inhabitants of many of the provinces, for whom the 'Abbāsīd family became an absent and increasingly irrelevant group.

Some other families who had been important in Umayyad times continued to be powerful under the new regime, either because they opposed the later Umayyads or because they offered support to the new dynasty allowing their previous allegiance to the old rulers to be conveniently overlooked. The most notable of these families were the Muhallabīs.¹¹ Originally from the Azd tribes of 'Umān, the Muhallabīs rose to prominence in Umayyad service and played a major role in defeating the Khārijite rebellions that threatened the caliphate in Fārs and other areas of Iran. Al-Muhallab and his son Yazid had been major figures in Umayyad politics, but in the later decades of Umayyad rule they had been marginalised. However, they still retained power and influence in the

11 For the general history of the family, see *EF*², “Muhallabids” (P. Crone), and Crone 1980, 133–35. For their role in the 'Abbāsīd elite, Kennedy 1981/2016, 82–3, 190–2.

city of Basra, and on the approach of the 'Abbāsīd armies in 132 H/749 CE they brought the city over to the cause of the new dynasty. Over the coming decades, they were rewarded with important provincial governorates and military commands, notably in Egypt and North Africa and eventually in Sind as well. In North Africa they formed a minor dynasty referred to many centuries later by the local historian Ibn 'Idhārī (d. c. 712 H/1312 CE)¹² as the *dawlat al-muhālība*. If things had turned out differently, it might well have been the Muhallabīs rather than the Aghlabids who were remembered as the first independent rulers of Muslim Ifrīqiya (Tunisia). In the event, their rule was terminated by the caliph al-Rashīd and their evanescent *dawla* disappeared. Nonetheless, the history of the family shows clearly that the 'Abbāsīds had no qualms about making use of the talents and influence of these important supporters of the previous dynasty. The Muhallabīs brought with them influence in Basra itself and in the Basran trading networks that led from North Africa through Egypt (where there were Muhallabī governors) to Basra and the Gulf and finally to Sind (where there were also Muhallabī governors). In return for governorships, the family brought the caliph influence in areas where 'Abbāsīd armies seldom reached. It could be argued that the Muhallabīs mediated caliphal soft power in the southern fringes of the empire and among the merchant and commercial classes.

The most important source of military power for the caliphs was the group known collectively as the *quwwād*. The term *qā'id* (pl. *quwwād*) is one of a number of Arabic words for leadership used throughout Arabic historiography. In the early 'Abbāsīd period the term had an almost technical meaning, describing the cadre of military officers who formed the backbone of the contemporary 'Abbāsīd army. By tracing the careers of members of some of these families, we can establish a profile of the group and their trajectories. Among the well-known families were those of Mālik b. al-Haytham al-Khuzā'ī, Musayyib b. Zuhayr and al-Ḍabbī, 'Uthmān b. Nahik al-'Akkī, 'Īsā b. Māhān and others. Here I have chosen to concentrate on two, the families of Khuzayma b. Khāzim al-Tamīmī and Qaḥṭaba b. Shabīb al-Ṭā'ī. I shall also discuss the family of Ma'n b. Zā'ida al-Shaybānī, who though their origins were different had much in common with the other *quwwād* dynasties.

Almost all the *quwwād* came from Khurāsān. The first known members of this elite joined the armies of the 'Abbāsīd revolution from 130 H/747 CE onwards. Many of them had served Abū Muslim, the leader of the revolution in Khurāsān, but changed their allegiance to the caliph al-Manṣūr after Abū Muslim's execution. They all bore Arabic names and their *nisbas* show that they

12 Ibn 'Idhārī 1948.

claimed to be descended from well-known Arab tribes. Whether this is actually true or they were Iranian *mawālī* who wanted to claim Arab origin is impossible to ascertain. They seem to have been Arabic speaking and the language of the army was probably Arabic, though it is likely that the Arabic-Persian hybrid language we now know as New Persian was developed in their ranks at this time.¹³ The non-Muslim populations of the Jazīra were certainly aware of their eastern origins, and describe them as Persians.¹⁴

This elite had a number of distinctive features. Firstly it was geographically mobile. Members typically served in different provinces of the caliphate, returning to Baghdad between terms of office to be given new appointments. Alternatively they might enjoy a period of office in the capital itself by serving as members of the elite military units attached to the caliphal court, the *shurṭa* (police) and the *ḥaras* (guard). When they were appointed to governorships or military commands, this was symbolised by the handing over of a *liwā'* or banner of office. They were, in fact, an elite who owed their loyalty to Baghdad and the caliphate rather than to the provinces they governed, a truly pan-imperial cadre.

The leading figures among the *quwwād* retained contacts in the Khurāsānī places where their families originated. They may well have returned on visits and almost all the major families produced at least one provincial governor. At the same time they were also given properties called *qaṭā'i'* (sing. *qaṭī'a*) in Baghdad.¹⁵ Typically these included dwelling houses, a market, a square (*rah̄ba*) and sometimes a mosque. They settled their troops in these urban quarters, where the men could benefit from the commercial opportunities afforded by the expanding new capital. It is likely that the *quwwād* families recruited soldiers from their native Khurāsān and from those of Khurāsānī descent who had settled in Baghdad. They may well have been responsible directly for the payment of salaries to their men, but we have no clear information regarding this.

The composition of the military following of the first family of *quwwād* studied here repays more detailed examination. The family of Khāzīm b. Khuzayma al-Tamīmī¹⁶ was closely connected with his town of origin: Marw al-Rūdh, a small city on the Murghāb river whose site now lies on the border between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. When he was sent to 'Umān in 751/2 to fight the Khāri-

13 Bulliet 2009, 140–142, argues that New Persian emerged as a language used by cotton traders to do business. I would argue that it is at least as possible that it emerged among the Khurāsānī military contingents led by the 'Abbāsīd period *quwwād*.

14 The *Chronicle* of Michael the Syrian (1899–1910) makes this very clear.

15 For the distribution of properties in Baghdad, see al-Ya'qūbī 1892, 140–55, now available in an English translation, al-Ya'qūbī 2018, I, 73–87.

16 Crone 1980, 180–1; Kennedy 1981/2016, 81–2.

jite rebels, his forces consisted of men from his *ahl* (family), his *‘ashīra* (tribe), his *mawālī* (freedmen), the people of Marw al-Rūdh and some Tamīmīs who joined him as he passed through Basra. All these men were in some way dependent on or related to him. Four years later he was fighting Khārijite rebels again, this time in the Jazīra with 8,000 men of Marw al-Rūdh. In 758–759 he was ordered back to Khurāsān to fight the governor, who had rebelled against the caliph. On his approach the people of Marw al-Rūdh rose up against the rebels, captured their leader and handed him over to Khāzim, showing that despite some ten years absence in the west he still retained close links to his native town. When he died, his power and position passed to his son Khuzayma, who was able to raise 5,000 armed supporters in Baghdad on the night in 169 H/786 CE when the caliph al-Hādī died. The family owned a prestigious house in a central part of Baghdad, strategically placed at the east end of the city’s main bridge of boats. In 198 H/813 CE, though Khāzim himself was old and blind, this house became a meeting place for supporters of al-Amin who wished to negotiate his peaceful surrender to Ṭāhir and the supporters of al-Ma’mūn.¹⁷

We are well informed about the family of Khāzim because of the high-profile campaigns he fought in, but he was likely typical of the *qā’id* cadre. He raised the troops he commanded and he probably distributed their pay. He was in fact not a mere employee of the caliph, but (along with the rest of his family) a contractor who needed to be rewarded and respected for his services. Without the loyalty of such figures, the caliph would have been unable to maintain control over his vast empire.

Another typical family of *quwwād* were the descendants of Qaḥṭaba b. Sha-bīb al-Ṭā’i,¹⁸ but the trajectory of this elite family is rather different from that of Khāzim. Qaḥṭaba came from the same Arab-Khurāsānī background as Khāzim. He had been the leader of the army Abū Muslim sent to the west to install the ‘Abbāsids as caliphs, and would certainly have enjoyed a leading position under the new regime if he had not been killed crossing the Euphrates in the final stages of the campaign. He left two adult sons, al-Ḥasan and Ḥumayd, who both enjoyed long but very different careers in the ‘Abbāsīd imperial elite. Al-Ḥasan took over his father’s command and joined the siege of the last Umayyad governor Yazīd b. Hubayra in the old Umayyad garrison city of Wāsiṭ. Here he came in contact with the caliph’s brother Abū Ja’far, later caliph himself under the title al-Manṣūr. Together they forced the surrender of this last outpost of Umayyad resistance.

¹⁷ Al-Ṭabarī 1879–1901, III, 916.

¹⁸ For this family, see Crone 1980, 188–189; Kennedy 1981/2016, 79–80.

The bond the two men struck up was the foundation of al-Ḥasan's subsequent career. He followed the future caliph when he became governor of the Jazīra and provided him with crucial support in his final showdown with Abū Muslim in 755. He spent most of the rest of his long career on the Byzantine frontier and in Armenia. Here he worked closely with military leaders in the frontier districts (the *thughūr*), leading expeditions deep in Byzantine territory and leading projects like the rebuilding of the frontier fortress of Malatya. Like all the leading *quwwād* he was given property in Baghdad (including a street, a *raḅaḍ* and houses) on which to settle his Khurāsānī followers. He died in 181 H/797 CE at the age of 84, full of years and distinction.

By contrast, his brother Ḥumayd was in some ways the black sheep of the family. He made a number of unwise career decisions that would normally have resulted in disgrace, if not execution. The fact that he survived shows how dependent successive caliphs were on the support and loyalty of these Khurāsānī families. While al-Ḥasan attached himself to the future caliph al-Manṣūr, his younger brother took the side of the caliph's uncle 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī when he challenged al-Manṣūr for the supreme title. However, 'Abdallāh also sought the support of the Syrian military elites who had supported the Umayyads. Deep-seated tensions between them and Ḥumayd's Khurāsānī followers meant he deserted before the final battle that saw al-Manṣūr victorious.

Despite Ḥumayd's support of al-Manṣūr's rival, he was appointed governor of Egypt just five years later in 142 H/759 CE. He subsequently jeopardised his position yet again at the time of the great 'Alid rebellion led by Muḥammad the Pure Soul in 145 H/762 CE, when he fled the battlefield and almost caused a disastrous panic in the 'Abbāsīd army. Once more he was rehabilitated, serving as governor of Armenia and finally in the most powerful position open to any of the Khurāsānī military elite: as governor of Khurāsān from 151 H/768 CE until his death in 159 H/776 CE. Like his brother, he had properties in Baghdad.

Both al-Ḥasan's and Ḥumayd's sons carried on the family tradition. The third generation played an important role in supporting al-Amin against his brother al-Ma'mūn in the great 'Abbāsīd civil war after the death of al-Rashīd. Like most of these families, the descendants of Qaḥṭaba b. Shabīb lost everything during the long conflict. Their properties in Baghdad were destroyed and their connections with Khurāsān cut off. They were completely excluded from government office during the caliphates of al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'taṣim.

Not all of the families who constituted the military elite were of Khurāsānī origin and not all had supported the 'Abbāsīd revolution. The family of Ma'n

b. Zā'ida in fact broke most of the rules that might lead to advancement.¹⁹ They were the most prominent of the *ashrāf* (nobles) of the bedouin tribe of Shaybān, which dominated most of the northern Iraqi steppes. They had a substantial following among their fellow tribesmen and could bring experienced and hardy warriors to serve in the 'Abbāsīd armies—but they also had fierce and determined enemies within their own tribe. As tribal leaders, they were opposed by Khārijite groups from Shaybān and by other tribes bitterly hostile to the *ashrāf* who served both Umayyad and 'Abbāsīd caliphates.

Ma'n b. Zā'ida had been a leading supporter of the last Umayyad caliph Marwān II; he went so far as to claim that it was he who killed Qaḥṭaba b. Shabīb at time of the crossing of the Euphrates. Those two facts would have made relations with the new regime strained, to put it mildly. With his record, it would seem most improbable that his family would enjoy elite status under the 'Abbāsīd caliphs. Yet that proved the case. Ma'n went perfunctorily into hiding after the fall of the Umayyads but he was clearly hovering, looking for an opportunity to ingratiate himself with al-Manṣūr. His chance came with the rebellion of the Rāw-andiyya, a group of radical Shī'ites, in Baghdad. It caught the caliph off his guard and Ma'n was present to save his life. After this al-Manṣūr recognised that Ma'n, along with his Shaybānī tribesmen, was a valuable supporter. He was sent on distant and unglamorous postings to places like Yaman and Sistān, and was killed in 152 H/772–773 CE in Bust (in the modern Helmand province of southern Afghanistan) when a group of Khārijites dug through the flat roof of his house and surprised him.

He seems to have left no sons. His position within the tribe and his feud with the Khārijites was inherited by his nephew Yazīd b. Mazyad, whom Khārijites pursued to Baghdad and attempted to murder on the city's bridge of boats. Yazīd b. Mazyad became a leading military commander in the reign of al-Mahdī but found himself on the wrong side of a major political conflict when the caliph was succeeded by his son Mūsā al-Hādī. Mūsā enjoyed strong support among military leaders and Yazīd played an important part in this. He is said to have been among those who urged the new caliph to remove his brother Hārūn from the succession and to execute his mentor and leading supporter Yaḥyā the Barmakid. In the event, the sudden death of Mūsā al-Hādī and Hārūn's accession meant that Yazīd, like other *quwwād*, was in deep disgrace and perhaps lucky to escape with his life.

Apart from a short spell as governor of Armenia, Yazīd remained in the political wilderness for almost a decade until the caliph was once more in need of

¹⁹ For this family, see Crone 1980, 169–170.

his military abilities and tribal following. The Jazīra was disturbed by a widespread Khārījite rebellion led by the charismatic and romantic figure of al-Walīd b. Ṭarīf al-Shārī, who was said to have been from the same Shaybānī tribe as Yazīd. The forces sent by the Barmakīd administration were unable to deal with these fast-moving opponents until, despite the advice of Yaḥyā b. Khālīd, the caliph called on the services of Yazīd. He led his tribal following ('*ashīra*') against the enemy, defeated the rebels and killed their leader al-Walīd, whose grief-stricken sister composed one of the greatest laments in classical Arabic literature on his death. Yazīd was now firmly back in favour with the caliph. His career prospered and he served Hārūn in Khurāsān, on the Byzantine frontier and in Armenia, where he died in 185 H/801 CE.

His son Asad inherited his tribal following and it would seem his prestige. During the great civil war, he was a vigorous supporter of al-Amīn and was known as *fāris al-'arab*, the 'knight of the Arabs'. Like his father and uncle, he was looked up to as an exemplar of the ancient bedouin virtues of courage and generosity. Unfortunately, the defeat of al-Amīn meant that Asad lost power and influence. He had no place in the new 'Abbāsīd caliphate as it was reconstructed by al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'taṣim; Arab tribal followings were not allowed to participate in the new military organization of the time, dominated as it was by eastern Iranians and Turks. However, unlike many of the other *quwwād* families under discussion here, the Shaybānī *ashrāf* reinvented themselves, survived and prospered.

In 171 H/787 CE Hārūn had appointed Yazīd b. Mazyad as governor of Azerbaijan, a province requiring a firm military hand to keep the locals peaceful whilst defending them from the Khazars to the north.²⁰ When he died in the provincial capital of Bardha'a, his son Asad was appointed to succeed him. It seems as if the family connection with the province continued. In 245 H/859–860 CE the caliph al-Mutawakkil appointed Yazīd's grandson Muḥammad b. Khālīd as governor of Bāb al-Abwāb (Derbent) and its surrounding districts. "He rebuilt the city of Ganja and was granted it and the estates (*ḍiyā'*) in the area as hereditary possessions (*irthan*)".

With the assassination of al-Mutawakkil in the next year, caliphal control over the Caucasus effectively collapsed and left the family in control. In the years to come the descendants of Ma'n b. Zā'ida changed their collective identity and with it their familial claim to leadership. Instead of being *ashrāf* of Shaybān, they took the ancient Iranian title of Shirvān Shāh and claimed descent from the

²⁰ For the complicated events taking place in Azerbaijan in the 3rd century H/9th century CE, see Madelung 1975, 243–249.

semi-mythical Sāsānian hero Bahram Gur.²¹ Beginning with Manucehr, who succeeded in 418 H/1028 CE, the members of the family bore Persian rather than Arab names. The dynasty survived in the eastern Caucasus in one form or another until the mid-13th century, coincidentally disappearing at almost the same time as the ‘Abbāsids finally lost Baghdad.

The Shaybānī elite survived when other families of *quwwād* lost their status and identity for a number of reasons. The most important was their enjoyment of tribal support that was not necessarily dependent on salaries from the *dīwān* in Baghdad or revenues from Khurāsān. Though the tribe was clearly divided between supporters of the *ashrāf* and supporters of the Khārijites, there were tribesmen who had followed their leaders and settled in Azerbaijan where the family established their power base in later generations, having an almost hereditary position in the eastern Caucasus before the death of Hārūn and the great civil war. Although they fought on the losing side that time, they had a power base beyond the reach of al-Ma’mūn and his victorious general Ṭāhir. They did not even suffer from the loss of their property in Baghdad after the civil war, because seemingly they never had any. As we have seen, the family survived, but only by adapting themselves to new circumstances in new areas and adopting an entirely new political personality: as Iranian *shahs*, not Arab *ashrāf*.

The last family I want to consider in detail is that of al-Ash’ath b. Qays al-Kindī. Their history illustrates another pattern of continuity and survival among the elite of the Umayyad and early ‘Abbāsīd caliphates. Descended from the kings of the great south Arabian tribe of Kinda, the family of al-Ash’ath came from the highest echelons of the pre-Islamic Arab nobility. Al-Ash’ath himself had pledged allegiance to the Prophet but joined the *ridda* (apostasy) after his death. Despite this, because of their status as tribal leaders the family still remained influential among the Kindīs who settled in Iraq during the Umayyad period. Al-Ash’ath’s grandson, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, led the last great, unsuccessful rebellion of the *ashrāf* of the Iraqi tribes against the Umayyads in 82 H/701 CE. Under the early ‘Abbāsīds, the Kindī leaders enjoyed a modest revival of their power, with several of their members appointed as governors of Kufa.

Unlike the Shaybānīs, who could clearly mobilise a nomad force from their tribesmen, the influence of the Kindīs seems to have been urban and based in the city of Kufa. Though they never reached the top ranks of the ‘Abbāsīd elite, they were important in securing the loyalty of the people of Kufa to the ‘Abbāsīd cause, especially when faced with the ‘Alid rebellion of Muḥammad the Pure Soul in Medina in 145 H/762 CE. The fact that the city, so turbulent in

²¹ See Vacca 2017, 144–145.

Umayyad times, was peaceful throughout the first 'Abbāsīd half-century must have been in part due to their influence.

This was the family that produced the famous intellectual Ya'qūb b. al-Sibāh al-Kindī, known as the 'philosopher of the Arabs'. Like many of the leading figures in Kufa, he had moved to Baghdad as the city lost economic and political status in favour of the capital. Ya'qūb seems to have built up his famous library from the wealth he inherited from his illustrious family, but appears to have had no personal military or political ambitions himself. With his death, we lose touch with the family, but their story is an interesting one of elite survival and progressive adaptation to the Rāshidūn, to the Umayyads and to the 'Abbāsīds. They moved from tribal leaders, to defeated rebels, to functionaries of the 'Abbāsīd state, and finally to the intellectual eminence that ensured the Kindī name was the only one of the early 'Abbāsīd elite families to remain well-known in later centuries, as its reputation spread to the cathedral schools and universities of western Europe.

The dominance of this early 'Abbāsīd elite was ended by the great civil war that followed the death of the caliph al-Rashīd in 193 H/809 CE. His son al-Amīn enjoyed the support of most of the early 'Abbāsīd elite. Led by 'Alī b. 'Īsā b. Māhān, the *quwwād* of the Khurāsāniyya were defeated near Rayy in northern Iran by the much smaller army of the supporters of al-Ma'mūn. Although some figures of the elite remained at al-Ma'mūn's court, the army commanders (notably Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn) came from eastern Iranian families with no previous connection with the 'Abbāsīd court. They had been thoroughly alienated from it by the harsh taxation policies of 'Alī b. 'Īsā.

This defeat, and the subsequent siege and ruin of Baghdad, destroyed the power base of much of the elite. The *quwwād* no longer enjoyed the financial support of the government to recruit and pay their followers, and they were cut off and excluded from their ancestral homes in Khurāsān. None of the *quwwād* families who had dominated the military structures of the early 'Abbāsīd caliphate played any important role in the caliphate re-established by al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'taṣim. The only member of the group known to us is Naṣr al-Khuzā'i—and not as a supporter of the caliphate, but as the man who led the rebellion in Baghdad protesting the enforcement of the doctrine of the creativeness of the Qur'ān.

It was not only the *quwwād* whose power was destroyed by the coming of the new order. The members of the 'Abbāsīd family who had played such important roles in the early 'Abbāsīd elite, representing the family (so to speak) in the great cities of Basra and Kufa, in the *sawād* of Iraq, Syria and sometimes Egypt, disappear at this time from the political stage. It is a sign of the changes in the early 3rd century *hijrī* that the sources no longer tell us the names of the governors of

these great cities and provinces, except when they are involved in some disturbance or battle like the defence of Basra against the Qarāmiṭa. When we are told their names, they are always members of the Turkish and eastern Iranian military, not members of the ruling family. We are informed incidentally that the descendants of the great ‘Abd al-Malik b. Ṣāliḥ, effective ruler of much of northern Syria, still lived in the neighbourhood of Manbij where he had constructed a celebrated palace, but there is no indication they played any part in the political life of the province. The provincial elites could no longer look to the patronage and protection of ‘their’ members of the ruling family, and this connection with the dynasty was lost.

The elite of the early ‘Abbāsīd caliphate is remarkable in Islamic history because of its variety, its broad base and its many contacts. We cannot understand the history of this great dynasty unless we look beyond the narrative of the actions of the caliphs to those who supported and influenced them.

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