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(A.H. 132-448)

M. A. Shaban

Excerpt

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I

THE FOUNDING OF THE
'ABBĀSID REGIME

Abū al-'Abbās served as the first 'Abbāsīd *Amīr al-Mu'minīn* for a little over four years 749-54/132-6; a period that seems to have been only a prelude to the coming to power of his older and stronger brother Abū Ja'far. Indeed the figure of the latter loomed large behind that of the man who was supposed to be actually in power. Although other members of the 'Abbāsīd family were engaged in various important functions, Abū Ja'far seems always to have been at the centre of things at the crucial moment. This is not to say that he was running the affairs of the empire in his brother's name, for the latter did not have this power. From the moment of his elevation to this high office the real authority remained in the hands of the military leaders of the Revolution. In fact, his selection as the new *Amīr al-Mu'minīn* and the imposition of this choice on the political leadership was the first manifestation of the usurpation of power by the military. Abū Salama, the *waṣīr āl Muḥammad* and virtually the head of the provisional government, had not been challenged when he assumed the direction of affairs in Kūfa after the arrival of the revolutionary army there. Nevertheless, his vacillation and wavering for many weeks on the important question of installing a new *Amīr al-Mu'minīn* was a curious political mistake. It is true that he was endeavouring to find *al-riḍā min āl Muḥammad*, a member of the family of the Prophet acceptable to all, who would command the widest possible support throughout the empire. It is also true that the implementing of this important ideal of the Revolution was of vital importance if rule by consent was to be restored to the troubled empire. However, the military leaders, assured by their success, had no patience for the deliberations of the vastly experienced Abū Salama. Their political experience was limited to their pre-revolutionary struggle in Khurāsān, but now that they were suddenly thrown into the whirlwind of the politics of empire, they decided that the best course to ensure the continuous success of their revolution was to take matters into their own hands and hold on to their newly acquired power.

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Of course they knew that the general Shī'ite opinion was in favour of an *Imām*/*Amīr al-Mu'minīn*, an all powerful leader who could bring justice to all. However, they also realized that by installing such a leader they would have to give up their own power. As they were not ready to accept this, they opted for an *Amīr al-Mu'minīn* who would not be an *Imām*. Overruling Abū Salama they made sure that the powers of the *wazīr* were not transferred to the *Amīr al-Mu'minīn*. The latter would be only a figurehead with minimum religious functions if any at all. The 'Abbāsids, the members of the House of the Prophet who had the weakest claims, were ready to accept the office on any terms. The military leaders did not find it difficult to secure the choice of Abū al-'Abbās, the weakest member of the family. As he was called 'Abdullah, which was the same as the name of his stronger brother Abū Ja'far, it was made abundantly clear that their choice was Ibn al-Ḥārithiyya – the son of the Ḥārithite woman; make no mistake! Other stronger members of the family had no alternative but to accept and respect this choice. Meanwhile, from the moment of his accession, when an uncle had to finish his inaugural speech for him, until his death, Abū al-'Abbās had the whole-hearted support of all the members of his family who were also not oblivious of their self-interest.

Although the new office of *wazīr* was a corner-stone in the structure of government as planned by the political leadership of the Revolution, the realities of the new situation made it redundant. Neither the military leaders nor the impotent *Amīr al-Mu'minīn* had any interest in continuing an institution that would have imposed limitations on their power. Moreover, Abū Salama, by his behaviour and his failure to achieve what he had set out to do, had made his position intolerable. It was an easy matter for Abū al-'Abbās, supported by his brother Abū Ja'far, to obtain the acquiescence of the military leaders and get rid of the hapless *wazīr*. However, while the decision to nominate Abū al-'Abbās was taken on the spot by Abū al-Jahm – the political commissar of the army and representative of Abū Muslim – in consultation with the other military leaders present in Kūfa, it is instructive to notice that the question of eliminating the *wazīr* had to be referred to Abū Muslim, the *Amīr al-Muḥammad*, in Khurāsān. The latter readily concurred and even sent his own men to carry out Abū Salama's execution. At the same time Abū Muslim decided, on his own, that Sulaymān b. Kathīr al-Khuzā'i, the elder statesman of the Revolution in Merv, should also be eliminated. Among the original organizers of the Revolution

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it is clear that there was approval of Abū Salama's opposition to the 'Abbāsids. But from Abū Muslim's point of view such latent opposition to the newly established regime could only represent a serious threat to the whole enterprise and therefore had to be dealt with severely and decisively.

It should be noted that these developments took place in a relatively short period and were initiated by men who were closely involved in an all-consuming violent revolution. They still had to defeat their main adversary in order to establish their authority over the greater part of the empire. Abū Muslim, the organizer of the revolutionary army, had to stay behind in Khurāsān to safeguard the only secure base of this army with their homes and families. It is probably because of this factor that he was able to maintain his hold over the Khurāsāniyya in far away 'Irāq. It is not surprising that Abū al-Jahm, Abū Muslim's representative and political commissar of the army in Kūfa, took over the responsibilities of the *wazīr* without seeing the need of assuming the title. He thereby combined control of the army with control of the administration. Under the circumstances there was manifest co-ordination between the headquarters in Khurāsān and the military leadership in 'Irāq. The latter also had the complete co-operation of Abū al-'Abbās and all his brothers, uncles and cousins.¹

Such harmony continued for only a few months until the major forces of the Marwānids were destroyed; cracks then began to appear in this united front. Some of the Khurāsāniyya became anxious to return to their homes.² They might have considered themselves on an extended expedition that had lasted over three years, but they could not have contemplated permanent settlement in 'Irāq. Their leaders did not seem to have had clear plans for them and even if they did, events were moving too fast for any such plans to take effect. The setting up of new camps at Hāshimiyya and then Anbār are not to be taken as attempts at establishing new capitals, but rather as temporary measures to house the army as circumstances required. Naturally Abū al-'Abbās would want some of the troops to stay in 'Irāq, at least for the time being, in order to bolster his regime, but he could not prevent those who wanted to return from doing so. Indeed he could have no serious objection to reducing

¹ For details of this phase see M. A. Shaban, *The 'Abbāsid Revolution*, Cambridge, 1970 pp. 138-68.

² al-Ṭabarī, Muḥ. b. Jarīr, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., Leiden 1879-1901, III, p. 75.

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the size of an army that deprived him of any real power. In the event it was decided to raise the stipends of the Khurāsāniyya to eighty dirhams a month and to allow some of them to return home. This last measure resulted in two problems, however, one in 'Irāq and the other in Khurāsān.

In 'Irāq, and in Syria for that matter, there were many remnants of the defeated Marwānid forces. While some of them had taken advantage of the situation to settle down to a peaceful life, others like those of Jazīra, the hard core of Marwān's army, felt disgruntled and waited for a chance to turn the tide. Yet others were ready to throw in their lot with the new regime either out of conviction or because of the lack of a better alternative.¹ These last offered the insecure 'Abbāsids a golden opportunity of recruiting their own forces to balance the power of the Khurāsāniyya and to compensate for the loss of those who had returned home. Members of the 'Abbāsīd family were appointed to lead newly formed contingents of these men and charged with mopping-up operations in various parts of the empire.² At least for the duration of the reign of Abū al-'Abbās this solution satisfied all parties concerned.

In Khurāsān, the problem was far more complicated and created serious trouble for Abū Muslim. It should not be assumed that, as the Revolution had sprung from Merv, all the population of Khurāsān and the East had rushed in to support it. Indeed there is no better indication that the situation there was precarious than the fact that Abū Muslim himself had to stay behind to tend it rather than lead the victorious army to reconquer the empire. Naturally he kept enough recruits at hand to support, if not to protect, his own position and very soon this proved to have been a wise decision. It should be remembered that although radical change had taken place in Merv, nothing much had happened to cause substantial change in the rest of Khurāsān and the East from the conditions that had obtained after the conquest. The treaties concluded between the Arab conquerors and the conquered populations of the various localities were still in force; and the taxes were allocated and collected accordingly. The Principalities of Ṭukhāristān were still intact and still governed by their princes or military lords albeit under Arab supervision. The city-states of Soghdiana kept their own socio-economic structures under their own princes. In short, the system

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-7.

² Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī, *Kitāb al-Futūb*, Istanbul manuscript, Library of Ahmet III, no. 2956, vol. II, ff. 227B, 228B, 233B.

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of protectorates created by the Arabs in the East was still in force.¹ Now, the sudden jolt of a revolution in their area caused them both anxiety and consternation, and even aroused the hopes that some of them had once entertained of regaining their long lost independence.

Fortunately for Abū Muslim the latter feeling was not widespread in these parts and minor uprisings, such as the one in Bukhārā, were easily subdued.² But as a leader, he was too vigorous and too revolutionary to leave things as they were in his own backyard. He embarked upon a grand plan designed to convert the population of the entire East to Islam. Nēzak the stubborn Hephthalite prince of Bādghīs was but one example of such converts. He became a close adviser to Abū Muslim and his followers were soon amongst the latter's forces.³ The prince of Khuttal was not so co-operative; when he felt the pressure he called on the Chinese for help and when it did not materialize he went to China.⁴ However, Abū Muslim must have shown a great deal of dexterity, and in his zeal perhaps tried to be all things to all men.⁵ Nevertheless, during his short period of power he was able to set in motion a policy that irrevocably brought into the Islamic polity the mass of the indigenous population of the East and, as we shall see, their role was of paramount significance.

The trouble came from the Khurāsānian Arabs and particularly from those who had returned from 'Irāq. After their great victories in the west they seem to have had some delusions about their status at home. At first they agreed to join those who had remained behind with Abū Muslim to carry out his policy of the effective penetration of the eastern principalities and Soghdiana. But when they, like the others, were assigned to garrison duty in the various strongholds of the area their hopes of returning to civilian life were dashed and they immediately mutinied. Their concerted rebellion in Bukhārā, Tirmidh and Ṭāliqān was so serious that Abū Muslim himself had to lead the action against them. Although they seem to have had allies in Abū Muslim's camp, he was able to ride the storm and reaffirm his authority over his forces.⁶

When he saw that a relatively peaceful situation obtained in both east and west, Abū Muslim decided that it was time to see for himself what had happened in the heart of the empire. On the pretext of going on the pilgrimage he journeyed to 'Irāq with a suitable

¹ See M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History A.D. 600-750 (A.H. 132): A new Interpretation*, Cambridge, 1971, p. 172.

² Ṭabarī, III, p. 74.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 100, 107.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 79, 119-20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 81-2.

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retinue. At Anbār he was cordially received by the *Amir al-Mu'minin* and Abū Ja'far himself accompanied him to Makka. On their way back after the pilgrimage they were informed of the death of Abū al-'Abbās and his will that the succession should pass to Abū Ja'far. It is significant that Abū Muslim, and all the members of the 'Abbāsīd family, with one exception, accepted this nomination.¹ This one exception was 'Abdullah b. 'Alī, an uncle of Abū Ja'far. He was a leading member of the family who had distinguished himself in the fight against Marwān and in the subsequent campaigns in Jazīra and Syria. It was on his advice that the remnants of the Marwānīd forces had been recruited into the 'Abbāsīd armies. He commanded many of them together with a small contingent of the Khurāsāniyya. He was, moreover, capable of using these forces to bring into line the hard core of Marwān's army of Jazīra which had lingering hopes of resisting 'Abbāsīd control.² Meanwhile, the Byzantines began to take advantage of the situation on their Arab borders and it became necessary for some action to be taken to discourage these attacks. 'Abdullah b. 'Alī and his forces were sent on a summer expedition for this purpose.³ While on their way to the Byzantine borders the news of the succession of Abū Ja'far reached them and they turned back in revolt.

It is not enough to explain this revolt by attributing it to the ambitions of its leader because he would certainly have needed to convince the multitude of his followers that these ambitions were worth risking their lives for. And why should they object so strongly to the succession of Abū Ja'far? 'Abdullah's army was a good example of reconciliation between victor and vanquished, and hitherto had been serving the 'Abbāsīd cause even against former comrades. Significantly their revolt was not against 'Abbāsīd rule; it was against a particular 'Abbāsīd in whose succession to power they must have seen a considerable threat to their own interests. Abū Ja'far was undoubtedly a man of strong opinions backed with powerful measures and he was bound to arouse strong objections. Apparently he had his plans for reconstructing the 'Abbāsīd forces within a new structure of the whole empire. He visualized a strong central government supported by a cohesive army that would give it effective control over the provinces. While he had no objection

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 88–9.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 52–7; Ibn A'tham, vol. II, ff. 227B, 228B, 237A, B; al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-Buldān*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Leiden, 1866, p. 192.

³ Ṭabarī, III, p. 91; Bal., *Futūḥ*, pp. 184, 189.

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to recruiting men from Syria and Jazīra, he did not want to see them as a separate army operating from bases in their provinces. This would not only lead to a revival of Marwānid forces but would also enhance the autonomy of these provinces vis-a-vis the central government. In this formative stage of 'Abbāsīd rule this could become a precedent that would endanger future 'Abbāsīd policies. Obviously 'Abdullah was of a different opinion, and, being closely involved with the Syrians, his inclination would be to favour their interests. Furthermore, he probably believed that Syria with its long history of jealousy for its own autonomy, would resist Abū Ja'far's plans and thus threaten the security of the 'Abbāsīds. Identifying the interest of his family with his own and that of his army, he led them in revolt.

Without any hesitation Abū Muslim, in full agreement with Abū Ja'far, swiftly marched at the head of all the available forces against the rebels. The Khurāsāniyya in the rebel army did not have any interest in supporting the rebellion; they quickly withdrew and joined Abū Muslim's forces. Although some of the Syrians also withdrew from 'Abdullah's army, it still constituted a formidable force. When the two armies met the ensuing conflict took four months before concluding in favour of Abū Muslim.¹

At this point Abū Ja'far took a most unusual step, though one very much in character and one which assumed great significance. He sent his own representative to watch over the division of the booty taken from the vanquished army. Considering that this booty could not have been of any great value and that the share of the central government was no more than one fifth, Abū Ja'far's action could not conceivably have been taken simply for fiscal purposes. He was asserting his authority as *Amīr al-Mu'minin* over Abū Muslim even at a moment when the latter had just won a great victory on his behalf. Abū Muslim completely understood the significance of this action. He expressed his objection in no uncertain terms, and instead of going back to 'Irāq which would have been his expected course of action, he headed towards Khurāsān declaring his dissent.² The dispute over the powers of the *Amīr al-Mu'minin* came to a head at a moment of Abū Ja'far's own choosing. His future and that of the whole regime rested on the outcome and he

¹ Ibn A'tham, vol. 11, ff. 223B-239B; al-Azdi, Yazīd b. Muḥ., *Tārikh al-Mawḥil*, ed. 'A. Ḥabība, Cairo, 1967, p. 178.

² Ṭabarī, III, pp. 98-150; Ibn A'tham, vol. 11, ff. 238B-240A; Ya'qūbī, Aḥmad b. Abi Ya'qub, *Tārikh*, Beirut, 1960, vol. 11, p. 366.

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was determined to win. He took all precautions, and used every means to persuade Abū Muslim to return to 'Irāq. When he returned Abū Ja'far took the enormous but very much calculated risk of having him executed without delay. Interestingly, the Khurāsāniyya did not raise any objections. The authority of the *Amīr al-Mu'minīn* had acquired enough legitimacy to allow him to eliminate the *Amīr al-Muḥammad*. As a consequence of this action Abū Ja'far came into his own, and it was probably then that he decided to take the title al-Manṣūr, the one destined to win. This was not an empty boast nor was it a simple shot in the dark. Abū Ja'far certainly had a genius for long term planning which characterized most of his actions and this one was no exception. He decided on a title not only for himself but also, in due course, the title of al-Mahdī for his successor, with all its messianic connotations. It was no secret that the 'Abbāsids had set themselves apart from the Shī'ites, but Abū Ja'far was aware that there was a great deal of sympathy for these dangerous rivals in all parts of the empire. However, given time an 'Abbāsīd-Shī'ite reconciliation was not necessarily impossible and it was certainly desirable. The Khurāsāniyya had rejected the notion of *Imām/Amīr al-Mu'minīn*, therefore he could not take the title *Imām*. The next best thing that might appeal to the Shī'ites was a title *Manṣūr/Amīr al-Mu'minīn* especially when it would be followed by a title *Mahdī/Amīr al-Mu'minīn* in the not too distant future. For almost a century, from the time of Mukhtār, the notion of a *mahdī* had been in circulation; prophecies of messianic expectations had been widely believed and there was no harm in exploiting them for the purpose of reconciliation.¹ There was resistance to this idea from some of the leaders of the Khurāsāniyya and indeed from 'Isā b. Mūsā, a most respectable member of the 'Abbāsīd family. But by the end of Manṣūr's long rule 754-75/136-58 this opposition was easily brushed aside at the crucial moment of the confirmation of Mahdī.²

Manṣūr's long-term planning was at its most striking in the period before the establishment of Baghdād. Practically every aspect of his policies was involved in this project. Yet, without the benefit of planning committees or consulting bodies, he single-handedly planned its construction, taking into consideration strategic, economic, administrative and demographic factors. In one year he was living in his palace on the site and the whole Round City was

¹ See Shaban, *Islamic History*, p. 95.

² Tabarī III pp. 331, 371, 344, 455; Ya'qūbi, *Tārīkh*, vol. II, pp. 379-80.

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finished in no more than four years at the low cost of 4,000,882 dirhams.¹ In his own lifetime it became a great metropolis.

The focal point of the new structure of government was Manṣūr himself. Although he gathered all secular powers in his own hands he had no delusions about the restricted functions of his office. He was not much different from an Umayyad ruler, and being a realist he laid no claim to religious authority to strengthen his position. However, by bestowing titles with religious connotations upon himself and his successor he was clearly indicating his thinking about the future. Meanwhile, he was vigorously pursuing plans for a highly centralized government projecting his authority from Baghdad. The base of his power was the Khurāsāniyya for whom living space was provided around the city. Inside the walls were the administrative departments, the heads of which were directly responsible to him. These departments were to co-ordinate the work of the various functionaries in the provinces.² To make sure that he was well informed about affairs in all corners of the empire and to ensure that the representatives of the central government were behaving properly, he appointed his own independent agents who reported directly to him every day, even on such mundane matters as food prices in their respective areas.³ The official title of such an agent was *ṣāhib barīd*, postmaster, but more important and to emphasize his direct relationship to the ruler he was also given the honorary status of *mawlā Amīr al-Mu'minin*. This is not to be confused with *mawlā* meaning a freed slave, a client or a non-Arab member of the army related to a certain man or an Arab clan, as was the case under the Umayyads. Under the 'Abbāsids assimilation had certainly done away with this type of relationship as far as the army was concerned, and virtually deprived it of any meaningful or significant sense in the rest of society. As we shall see, the term *mawlā*, like many other similar terms, went through many different changes in various parts of the empire during the period of this study.⁴ Knowing that *mawlā* could mean so many things and capitalizing on the special relationship that it used to denote, Manṣūr simply gave it a different twist to establish a new relationship between himself and members of his administration, and in this case

¹ Ṭabarī, III, p. 326.

² Jahshiyārī, Muḥ. b. 'Abdūs, *Kitāb al-Wuzarā'*, ed. M. al-Saqqā et al., Cairo, 1938, pp. 96-135; Azdi, *Mawṣi'at*, p. 215; Ya'qūbī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Leiden, 1892, pp. 240, 243.

³ Ṭabarī, III, pp. 414, 435; Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh*, vol. II, p. 384.

⁴ See below, p. 31.

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it can only have meant confidant of the ruler. Ibn Khaldūn carefully explains this special relationship for us, calling it *iṣṭinā'* i.e. "choosing another person for oneself for a special affair which this person is required to accomplish in a sufficient manner".¹

In Maṣṣūr's administration, there were more than fifty persons given this title and all of them acquired very high posts – at least seventeen were postmasters in areas they had originally come from or about which they had special knowledge.² Some of them were Arabs and as might be expected many were non-Arabs.³ Of the latter some were given or assumed Arab names. Probably their original names were ostentatiously un-Islamic or difficult to pronounce. There are examples of many *mawḷās* and their descendants serving successive 'Abbāsīd rulers over a period exceeding a century and in the same capacities.⁴ At least one of them was a prince from the eastern principalities, another was a brother-in-law of Maṣṣūr, and a third was his own step-son.⁵ This last example recalls the English custom of kings raising their illegitimate sons to the higher echelons of the nobility. Indeed under Maṣṣūr's successors there were cases closer to the English custom, when brothers or relatives of favourite concubines were appointed to high offices and accordingly were given this honorary status.

Maṣṣūr's internal espionage network was so successful that he was reputed to have had a mirror in which he could distinguish between friend and foe.⁶ Certainly, dismissed provincial governors knew only too well that they could not get away with any riches they might have extorted while in office. The special accounting department that Maṣṣūr established for this purpose was fully informed and was a good example of the strictness of his administra-

¹ Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, Beirut, 1961, pp. 237–8, 326–7; also see E. W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, reprinted Beirut, 1968 s.v. *istīnā'*, vol. IV, p. 1733.

² Ṭabarī, III, pp. 139, 140, 145, 151, 306, 319, 323, 367, 380, 392, 428, 454, 455, 456; Jahshiyārī, pp. 101, 124, 125, 129, 134; Bal., *Futūḥ*, pp. 183, 287, 293, 294, 310, 401; Azdī, *Mawḥil*, pp. 198, 296; Ya'qūbī, *Buldān*, pp. 241, 242, 244, 245, 247, 249; Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh*, vol. II, pp. 384, 392; Ibn al-Athīr, 'Izz al-Dīn, *al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh*, ed. C. J. Tornberg, Leiden, 1866–71, vol. VI, pp. 22, 50, 213, 467; Ṭayfūr, Aḥmad b. Abī Ṭāhir, *Kitāb Baghdād*, ed. H. Keller, Leipzig, 1908, p. 349; Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-Buldān*, Beirut, 1957, vol. III, pp. 25, 26.

³ Ṭabarī, III, p. 323; Ya'qūbī, *Buldān*, p. 244.

⁴ Ṭabarī, III, pp. 367, 428, 454, 529, 576, 582, 583, 979, 998, 1384, 1500, 1838; Ṭayfūr, pp. 7, 16, 19, 120, 121, 142; Jahshiyārī, pp. 124, 277; Bal., *Futūḥ*, pp. 293–4; Athīr, *Kāmil*, vol. VI, p. 200.

⁵ Ibn al-Jawzī, 'Abdulrahmān, *al-Muntazam*, manuscript, biography of 'Alī b. Šāliḥ 229 A.H., cf. Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-Umam*, ed. H. F. Amedroz, Oxford 1920–1, vol. I, p. 16; Ṭabarī, III, p. 456; Ibn Ḥazm, *Jamharat Ansāb al-'Arab*, ed. 'A. Hārūn, Cairo, 1962, p. 21.

⁶ Ṭabarī, III, p. 166.