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THE INTRODUCTION
OF MILITARY SLAVERY
SLAVERY: A POLITICAL
EXPEDIENT

BRIAN EASTWOOD

2003

2005/46

The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

THE INTRODUCTION OF MILITARY SLAVERY: A POLITICAL EXPEDIENT

A thesis submitted to

The Department of Arabic Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts

by Brian Eastwood

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(under the supervision of Dr. Eleonora Fernandes)

May 2005

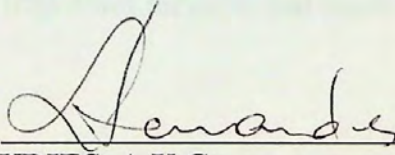
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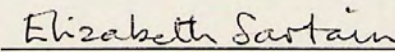
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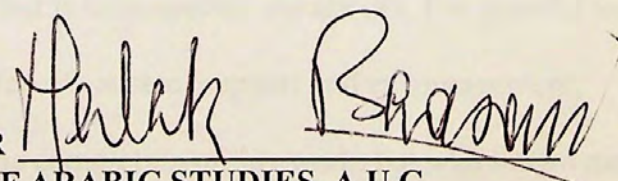
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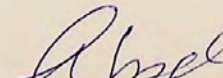
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DEDICATION

For my father,

Scott Eastwood

September 19, 1945 – September 24, 2004

ABSTRACT

The American University in Cairo

THE INTRODUCTION OF MILITARY SLAVERY: A POLITICAL EXPEDIENT

By Brian Scott Eastwood

Under the supervision of Dr. Eleonora Fernandes

Military slavery constituted one of the most important institutions in medieval Islamic history. Most research concerning military slavery concentrates on the Mamluk dynasty, while relatively little research explores the beginning of the institution and the reasons for its introduction. Those works that concentrate on military slavery or the 'Abbāsid time period either use it as an example for other arguments or do not provide enough detail to create a complete argument. As a result, the origins of an institution that affected almost a thousand years of Islamic history are not well understood. To understand the emergence of military slavery, primary and secondary materials are analyzed to try and complete the picture of its origins, giving scholars a concise look into the reason for the introduction of this institution.

Though military slavery is often marked as beginning during the reign of the 'Abbāsid caliph al-Mu'tasim (218-227AH (833-842AD)), the institution actually began during the reign of his predecessor, al-Ma'mūn (198-218AH (813-833AD)). Al-Ma'mūn faced many challenges during his reign as caliph. His primary challenge was a civil war with his brother, the caliph al-Amīn (193-198AH/809-813AD), who tried to replace him as heir to the caliphate with his own son, eventually ending in a victory for al-Ma'mūn; however, this victory had many consequences. Politically, al-Ma'mūn did not trust the support of the traditional 'Abbāsid power groups because they had largely allied with al-Amīn. As a result, he used elite Eastern families, mostly from Khurāsān, to supply his armies. Eventually they defeated al-Amīn and

his armies, but al-Ma'mūn was faced with a crisis of legitimacy that threatened to undermine the power of the caliph. Al-Ma'mūn took several steps to gain further support, and to legitimate his claim to the caliphate. The steps chiefly consisted of returning to the Baghdād (the capital city of the 'Abbāsids since the Caliph al-Mansūr's time in 136AH (754AD)) from his base in Khurāsān, dropping unpopular policies, recentralizing the empire, and using religious propaganda and symbolism. While performing these steps he also began to promulgate his own ideology of the caliphate, which mainly pointed to a reinforcement of the absolute authority of the caliph. The clearest view that we receive of his ideology comes from the time of the *mihna* and associated policies. However, these policies made him unpopular as he sought to expand the caliph's authority, relying on the Eastern provincial elites as his sole support. As a result, al-Ma'mūn began to acquire military slaves (and to encourage his brother, al-Mu'tasim, to do so also) to provide himself with a separate support group that would help to counter-balance the provincial elites, while providing him with a group of supporters who were inextricably tied to him in a master and slave, father and son, relationship. Though other reasons exist that influenced the use of Turkish military slaves, their introduction was primarily one of political support.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Military slavery is a very important topic in today's scholarship. Now more than ever, academia is beginning to realize the importance of military slavery in Islam throughout the medieval period. Research on military slavery primarily began as an area of Mamluk history, but the institution has been found in virtually every major Islamic state in the Middle East. The Mamluk and Ottoman Empires were the climax of the military slavery institution. Research has shown that military slaves held considerable power in military, political and social circles throughout Middle Eastern Islamic history. As powerful an institution as it came to be, its origins extend back into the formative period of Islam under the early 'Abbāsids, beginning with the caliph al-Ma'mūn (198-218AH/813-833AD).¹

In Islamic law the definition of a slave is composed in two parts: first, he is property that can be owned, sold, given as a gift, etc., and second, he is also a person that cannot be treated exactly like a commodity (i.e. he is a person).² Slaves' participation in war stretches back to the Prophet Muhammad, if not further; however, slaves systematically acquired specifically for military use (i.e. a military slave) did not begin until the reigns of al-Ma'mūn and his successor, al-Mu'tasim. The reasons for the systematized introduction are an important part of the military slavery puzzle. By knowing and understanding why military slaves were introduced, scholars can better understand the institution and its evolution, gain greater insight into questions such as how the institution could grow so large and have such enormous influence, and why it seemed to thrive in Islamic societies.

¹ The early 'Abbāsīd period, as defined in this paper, extends from the beginning of the 'Abbāsīd dynasty until the end of al-Mu'tasim's reign in 227AH (842AD).

² R. Brunschvig, " 'Abd," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new version. See also Appendix A for a comparison between Atlantic slavery and slavery in Islam.

The ascent of al-Ma'mūn to the caliphate was a difficult one. It began with a civil war between himself and his brother, the caliph al-Amīn (193-198AH/809-813AD). This civil war, which their father (the Caliph Harūn al-Rashīd) tried to prevent, ended with al-Ma'mūn's victory and then al-Amīn's death, which greatly injured the caliphate. Al-Ma'mūn spent his reign trying to legitimize his own rule, restore caliphal dignity, and project his own concept of the caliphate onto his subjects. However, his actions became unpopular and he lost most, if not all, of the support 'Abbāsīd caliphs normally relied upon. At first this was not too detrimental, for many of the most traditional 'Abbāsīd supporters, such as the Abnā',³ had helped his rival, al-Amīn, and al-Ma'mūn had collected a new group of supporters who had won the caliphate for him. However, as time wore on al-Ma'mūn needed to balance his supporters from the civil war, most of whom were from Eastern provincial elite families, with a new group—Turkish military slaves. Many reasons exist for the acquisition and importation of Turks as military slaves, but the primary reason was political—a group that would be totally loyal to him that he could use against rebellions and to enforce his vision of the caliphate, and that he could use as a counter-balance to his Eastern supporters.

³ The Abnā' were the supporters of the 'Abbāsīds during the 'Abbāsīd revolution in the mid-eighth century. See chapter II for a more complete explanation.

II. HISTORIOGRAPHY

Dr. David Ayalon was the first to contribute extensive research into military slavery, concentrating mainly in the field of Mamluk studies. The importance of his work can hardly be understated, but he never published a great amount of research pertaining to the introduction of military slavery. One exception to this was a paper written for the 26th International Congress of Orientalists in New Delhi in 1964. Later, this paper was published under the title, "The Military Reforms of Caliph al-Mu'tasim: Their Background and Consequences."⁴ In this article he sets out his views on the origins of military slavery. He does this by studying three important groups: the mawālī,⁵ the Abnā' and Khurāsānīs⁶, and the Arabs⁷. In studying the mawālī he points out that the trust shown to them by early 'Abbāsids and the part that they played in the administration was an important precedent to the introduction of military slaves because they provided a non-Arab source of support. His next group, the Abnā' and Khurāsānīs, is important because it showed that the Abnā', who supported al-Amīn during the war with al-Ma'mūn, continued (or reasserted themselves) to be an important and influential force. Finally, he touches upon the position of the Arabs during the civil war between al-Ma'mūn and al-Amīn. He demonstrates that while the majority of Arabs fought with al-Amīn, problems

⁴ David Ayalon, "The Military Reforms of Caliph al-Mu'tasim: Their Background and Consequences" in *Islam and the Abode of War: Military slaves and Islamic adversaries*, ed. David Ayalon (Aldershot, Great Britain: Variorum, 1994).

⁵ Mawālī (sing. Māwlā) is a somewhat ambiguous term that generally means "client." Mawālī were mostly non-Arabs who had allied themselves with an Arab family. See chapter III for a clearer explanation. Also see A.J. Wensinck and Patricia Crone, "Māwlā," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new version.

⁶ In general, the Abnā' were those who were closely tied to the 'Abbāsīd family during the revolution and helped it to succeed. The Khurāsānīs were those who lived in Khurāsān during this time period. Ayalon in this article combines them with the Abnā' probably because of their close relation. See chapter II for a more extensive explanation of these two groups.

⁷ Ayalon uses the term "Arab" for those who are of Arab descent. In this particular article he specifically speaks about those Arabs found in Syria.

abounded with their participation, and in particular as al-Amīn tried to rally them to fight off al-Ma'mūn's forces, but was unable to due to fierce conflicts between the Arabs and the Abnā'. In his own words Ayalon states:

The rise of the Mawālī and the eunuchs in the 'Abbāsīd court, as well as the decline of Arab power throughout the 'Abbāsīd empire...paved the way for the introduction of the Mamluks as a major military force in the capital and in other important centers. The military qualities of the "People of Baghdad", and particularly those of the Abnā', formed a major obstacle in realizing that object. The obstacle was circumvented by the building of a new 'Abbāsīd capital.⁸

Ayalon's thinking is clear and well studied, but it is incomplete. First, he dates the beginning of the institution with the caliph al-Mu'tasim once he has begun his reign. I will later argue that it actually began earlier with the caliph al-Ma'mūn. Second, he ascribes to the mawālī the two qualities of loyalty and trustworthiness, which were exploited by the caliphs, but he fails to show how and why military slaves came to be preferred rather than the continued reliance on mawālī. Though an incomplete draft by his own admission, this article began the process of reaching into the past to try and explain the introduction of military slavery.

A relatively small amount of research has been done on early military slavery by other scholars and there continues to remain a huge gap in our knowledge about the origins of military slavery and the reasons for its introduction. Most of the major research aside from Ayalon's on the early period of military slavery consists of five main works. First, Paul Forand's doctoral dissertation, "The development of military slavery under the 'Abbāsīd caliphs of the 9th century A.D. (third century A.H.) with special reference to the reigns of Mu'tasim and Mu'tadid."⁹ His exploratory dissertation (presented in 1962) provides a wealth of information on the physical

⁸ Ayalon, "Military," 22.

⁹ Paul G. Forand, "The Development of Military Slavery under the 'Abbāsīd caliphs of the 9th century A.D. (third century A.H.) with special reference to the reigns of Mu'tasim and Mu'tadid." (Ph. D. diss. Princeton University, 1962).

aspects of military slavery. He demonstrated through primary sources the methods of procurement and provided early evidence on Turkish slaves imported for service in the military. In addition, he also seems to have been the first to show a pronounced rivalry between the Abnā' and the Turkish military slaves, pointing to this as the cause of al-Mu'tasim's move to Sāmarrā'. He also points out possible training methods, their age at acquisition, how they were paid, and their education, each an important part of the puzzle when trying to determine the reasons for the introduction of military slavery. In addition, he also briefly explores the relationship between the caliph and his mawālī. Though his dissertation is a treasure trove of information contained in various primary sources, little analysis is done to provide answers to the question of why military slavery occurred in the first place. I will assert that military slavery was introduced for primarily political purposes.

Second, Patricia Crone's *Slaves on Horses: The evolution of the Islamic polity*, originally published in 1980.¹⁰ Her research concentrates in the correct time period, from the beginning of Islam until around 218AH (833AD), but the information in her book concentrates mostly on the "evolution of the Islamic polity," with the origins of military slavery taking a back seat in her argument—only being introduced as a result of Muslims "walking out" of government positions.¹¹ She argues that inequalities of the Umayyad system led to its downfall in both spiritual and physical ways. Spiritual because "...power in Islam had to be intrinsically sacred," which was not possible and therefore Muslims were left with only the "illusion" of it.¹² The physical downfall was then brought about by the 'Abbāsīd revolution. However, the problems of Islamic government did not stop there. According to her, the 'Abbāsīds failed to find

¹⁰ Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The evolution of the Islamic polity* (Cambridge, London, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980; Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹¹ Crone, 87.

¹² *Ibid.*, 48.

a “political rationale” so instead they adopted one similar to the Sassanids. In the midst of the turmoil the *‘ulamā*’ were alienated from the government and eventually created a rationale that saw “imperial power...as illegitimate in the most literal sense of the word,” and a *sharī‘a* law that bound the caliph “hand and foot.”¹³ Because of this, the ‘Abbāsids failed to gain legitimacy and support with the general population. As an example of how Muslims withdrew from the government, Crone uses the introduction of military slaves. She begins the institution with al-Mu‘tasim and seems to equate the beginning of the institution with the founding of Sāmarrā’. Her reason for the use of military slaves comes from combining the servile status of mawālī and “alieness” to the region to fend off attacks from what she sees as the increasing power of the *‘ulamā*’. However, I will argue that up until the time of al-Ma’mūn, the majority of the *‘ulamā*’ and the caliphs held close ties, each supporting the other. In addition, mawālī used by al-Ma’mūn, at least not the most powerful, were not in the same type of “servile” relationship with a caliph that slaves held—mawālī were held through ties of patronage, group feeling, and alliance, whereas military slaves held a much closer bond similar to adoption into a family. Crone succeeds in showing that military slaves were introduced to help control a chaotic situation, but misattributes it to a history of escalating resentment between the *‘ulamā*’ and the caliph and a lack of popular support and legitimacy. The one key element that she points out that my research supports is the necessity for this new group to be “alien” to the situation. In the end, Crone’s book provides some good information, but because of the emphasis on Islamic polity, fails to provide convincing reasons for the introduction of military slavery.

¹³ Ibid., 63.

Third, Daniel Pipes's *Slave Soldiers and Islam: The Genesis of a Military System*, originally published in 1981, strives to analyze military slavery.¹⁴ In his book review of Crone's *Slaves on Horses* Pipes stated that, "I am interested primarily in the role of Islam as a political force and chose to work on military slavery because it provides an excellent vehicle for assessing the significance of Islam in public affairs."¹⁵ Pipes' goal was to see how Islam, as a religion, is an effective motivation for political action. As such, he researched the institution of military slavery in many societies throughout history, not just in Islam. He comes to the conclusion that in lands ruled by Muslims, military slavery was the result of a failure of Islamic society in that Muslims withdrew from the military and thus needed to rely on imported slaves to do what they could not, or would not. He argues that Islamic government failed in three important areas: a unified *umma*, the caliphate, and *jihād*. A unified *umma* failed because the entire Muslim community was not united under one leader, the caliph. The caliphate failed because a candidate was not elected by the entire community, which would have unified the *umma*. *Jihād* failed because it did not defend and/or expand Muslim lands. As a result of these failures, Muslims withdrew from the government due to dissatisfaction and pursued other ways to fulfill their desires for religion, mainly in the forms of creating *madhhabs* and religious scholarship. Additionally, though Pipe's book contains much more detailed information, his concentration on his stated goal (i.e. Islam's political influence) and his broad outlook, covering vast amounts of time and space, give little information on the actual reasons for the origins and systematized use and acquisition of military slaves in Islam. For instance, he does not mention either al-Ma'mūn or al-Mu'tasim,

¹⁴ Daniel Pipes, *Slave Soldiers and Islam: The Genesis of a Military System* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981; Charlestown, MA: Acme Bookbinding, 2003).

¹⁵ Daniel Pipes, review of *Slaves on Horses: The evolution of the Islamic polity*, by Patricia Crone, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 45, no. 2 (April, 1986): 166.

probably because, in his outlook, the introduction of slavery was inevitable due to the characteristics of Islam as a religion, which set such high political ideals that they could never be fulfilled. As a result of this view, the timing of the introduction of military slavery loses its value becomes an inevitable course of action.

Unsurprisingly, because of his comprehensive view he tends to look past the specific events that led up to the actual introduction of military slaves. Though he does see the beginnings of military slaves based on political needs, he misses the mark by ascribing it to broader trends, instead of the combination of trends and specific circumstances in the reign of al-Ma'mūn. The result of Pipes' work is good general information on the institution of military slavery, but a lack of detailed analysis and research to flush out the actual events that brought the institution of military slavery into existence.

Fourth, Matthew Gordon's book, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords: A History of the Turkish Military of Samarra (A.H. 200-275/815-889 C.E.)*.¹⁶ Gordon does a superb job of gathering primary resources and presenting his research through clear and concise language. His efforts are substantial, but similar to Pipes, he fails to ask why military slavery was introduced and what events influenced it. Gordon's argument revolves around the Turks as military slaves in Sāmarrā', what effect they had on the caliph, and how they lived. He concentrates on where military slaves originated, how they were acquired, and who purchased them. He believes that military slaves were imported as a result of al-Ma'mūn's centralization efforts. These efforts affected the "new Turkish guard" that was created by al-Ma'mūn in the sense of greater access to Central Asia through the intermediary of various families increasing the availability of Turks, but is not seen as a purposeful effort to build-up

¹⁶ Matthew S. Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords: A History of the Turkish Military of Samarra (A.H. 200-275/815-889 C.E.)*. Albany: State University of New York, 2001.

the ranks of military slaves. He also believes that military slaves were part of al-Ma'mūn's restructuring of the army. Al-Ma'mūn did restructure the army; however, the role played by military slaves in this restructuring is much greater than being a single group amongst the many others. Al-Ma'mūn used them in part to counter-balance other elements in the army and also for other reasons not mentioned by Gordon, but which I will show below. His scholarship is undeniable, but primarily because of its emphasis on the Sāmarrā' period this work lacks explanations, in particular the political implications, for the origination of military slaves near the end of al-Ma'mūn's reign.

Lastly, Tayeb el-Hibri's dissertation, presented in 1994, "The reign of the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma'mūn (811-833): The quest for power and the crisis of legitimacy."¹⁷ As the title suggests, el-Hibri's dissertation covers most of al-Ma'mūn's reign and his struggle to overcome the obstacles he was faced with during his lifetime. Most of the attention is given to his efforts to attain power in the beginning of his reign, primarily through alliances and religious propaganda, and then his efforts to solidify his legitimacy through the imposition of an "absolutist" style leadership. El-Hibri's dissertation also touches briefly upon the issue of military slavery and the role it played in al-Ma'mūn's reign. The dissertation recounts various scholarly opinions on who the military slaves were and what purpose they fulfilled, then adds that their purpose was primarily three things: to boost military strength and resources, a counter-balance to the Khurāsānīs, and to provide a solid base of loyalty for the caliph. On each of these counts this thesis will agree; however, its discussion of them lacks the necessary explanations and detail. The limited analysis of the role and purpose of military slaves under al-Ma'mūn belies the huge step that it was

¹⁷ Tayeb el-Hibri, "The reign of the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma'mūn (811-833): The quest for power and the crisis of legitimacy" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1994).

shown to be. The arguments stated above encompass a very small part of the dissertation work (only fourteen pages relate to military slavery in a work that almost reaches 360 pages). The conclusions found in the dissertation are clearly on track, but the assertions made are done with little or no evidence to support them. In addition, he does not take other factors into consideration. For example, in the fourteen pages relating to military slavery a reference to Jāhiz (famous for his essays on Turks) is only found once, and it is not even a direct quotation, merely a summary of Pipe's argument. The dissertation also flatly rejects other considerations for the importation of military slavery, such as their importation because of special skills. Thus, while this thesis and el-Hibri's dissertation will sometimes find agreement with each other, there are differences of opinion in the main argument and most particularly in supplementary arguments.

Each of these works presents important points and weaknesses. Forand's pioneering work explained the physical aspects of military slavery, but failed to place its introduction into context with the times. Ayalon's efforts first showed possible political implications for al-Mu'tasim's use of military slavery, but failed to identify the early beginnings of the institution and was much too basic to identify more than the important players that caused al-Mu'tasim's move to Sāmarrā'. Crone tried to identify the origins of military slavery, but did so in the context of her argument that the Islamic polity had failed the *umma*, who then "walked out" from the government, which in turn led to an increase in *dhimmī* (non-Muslim) administrators and the introduction of military slaves. In addition, she states that part of the reason for their introduction was to combine *mawālī* servitude and "alieness" to the region. However, upon closer inspection these arguments do not stand up. 'Abbāsīd government did not totally fail the *umma* and, in fact, a great level of cooperation between the caliph and

the '*ulamā*' ensured the success of Islamic government. In addition, the type of bond between *mawālī* and slave are totally different. Pipes then made an effort to trace the institution of military slavery throughout history and show how it was adapted for Islam. Yet he also failed to show why it was introduced and the specific reasons for its adoption in the Muslim world. His lack of details on the specific situation made it seem as though the institution was inevitable because of the character of Islamic government and not the result of specific rulers, political situations and circumstances. Gordon does a great job at researching the original documents having to do with military slavery, but his work concentrates primarily on the Sāmarrā' period. As a result, he gives attention to the "where", "how", and "who" of the early period instead of the "why". In essence he sees the introduction of military slaves as part of a general reconstruction of the army and not a direct effort to affect the political situation of the time. Finally, el-Hibri comes to many valid conclusions, but fails to properly analyze and explain them. The reasons he gives for the introduction of military slaves are correct, but he also rejects some important supplemental reasons for their introduction. Thus, each author adds many pieces to the puzzle, but none ascertain the full answer, and most fail to recognize or write about the reasons why military slaves were introduced. This lack of explanation leaves a wide gap in the general knowledge of why military slaves were introduced and therefore the evolution and importance of the entire institution.

III. THE ROOTS OF POLITICAL CRISIS

Prior to al-Ma'mūn's reign, several groups formed the mainstay of early 'Abbāsīd support. Understanding who some of these power groups were and how they supported and influenced the 'Abbāsīds up until the reign of al-Ma'mūn is key to understanding why they eventually resisted or helped him. The majority of these power groups gained influence with the advent of the 'Abbāsīd revolution and the years prior to al-Ma'mūn's reign (though some of them also stretched back prior to the 'Abbāsīds) and continued to play an important part in 'Abbāsīd culture, military, and administration. In essence, the purpose of this chapter is to show which groups supported the 'Abbāsīds and those that did not support them. Though I have created distinct groups for purposes of broad comparison, it must be remembered that an individual might make up a portion of more than one group. For instance, a person might be a mawālī in the sense of non-Arab, but could also be a religious scholar (*'ulamā'*) or part of the administration (al-Kuttāb). The purpose of creating these groups is to show their support from a particular group's standpoint.

The Mawālī

The mawālī of al-Ma'mūn's time are a mixture of many different groups that existed before, during, and after the 'Abbāsīd revolution. In general, mawālī were non-Arabs who had become attached to a particular patron, family, or tribe, but by the time of al-Ma'mūn's reign, some mawālī were freedmen, others were clients attached to a particular Arab tribe, and still others were not attached to any particular patron. For the purposes of this paper the term mawālī refers to any Muslim non-Arab, thus the other groups detailed below (such as the Abnā') contained mawālī; however, they

are discussed as a separate group to show how mawālī on a broad scale influenced and supported the ‘Abbāsids.

Mawālī helped ‘Abbāsid society to function in many ways. For instance, many mawālī joined the military. The ‘Abbāsid revolution opened more doors for those of non-Arab descent, and the door into the army was already partially opened during the Umayyad period. Another thing that must have greatly helped the influx of mawālī of all forms into the military were Abū Muslim’s reforms near the beginning of the ‘Abbāsid revolution.¹⁸ In addition to the army, they likely also formed part of the bodyguard and *shurta* forces together with the Abnā’ under the caliph.¹⁹ One of the most telling examples of the importance of mawālī to the ‘Abbāsids came when al-Mansūr spoke to his son just before his death, he said:

O my son! I have collected for you a fortune, the like of which has not been collected by a caliph before me. I have collected for you Mawālī [in quantities] the like of which has not been collected by a caliph before me...Show favour to them and increase their numbers, because they are your source of power and reinforcement in an emergency.²⁰

Clearly, mawālī were held in high regard by al-Mansūr, who viewed them as one of the primary supports of the ‘Abbāsid caliphate—and important for emergencies. The continued reliance on mawālī (and in particular Khurāsānīs) is also shown by the raising of the ‘Abbasiyya by Hārūn al-Rashīd.²¹ The soldiers sent to Baghdād from this group numbered at least 20,000, which likely rivaled the numbers of Abnā’ already in Baghdād.²² Thus, they also formed an important part of ‘Abbāsid pre-civil war armies.

¹⁸ See Moshe Sharon, “The Military Reforms of Abū Muslim, Their Background and Consequences,” in *Studies in Islamic History and Civilization: in Honour of Professor David Ayalon*, ed. Moshe Sharon, 1-39 (Jerusalem: Cana Ltd., 1986).

¹⁹ See Crone, 66.

²⁰ Al-Tabarī quoted in Ayalon, “Military,” 35. Because of the ambiguity of the term, al-Mansur may have been talking about both Arab and non-Arab mawālī of the ‘Abbāsid house.

²¹ The Abbasiyya were a group of soldiers collected from the Khurāsān region.

²² Crone, 74

Mawālī were not only involved in the army, they also played an important role in the administration. One of the most important things in any government is the collection of taxes and they provided tax collection services in many of the ex-Sassanian provinces. Many of the mawālī in the 'Abbāsīd government were the landed aristocracy left over from the Sassanid empire. Zakeri states: "The *dihqans* emerged as the chief authorities for the subjugated Iranians and assumed the responsibility for the affairs of the general population."²³ By performing their works both in the administration and in the army, the mawālī had a vested interest in supporting the 'Abbāsīds. In fact, according to al-Suyūtī, by the time of al-Mansūr priority for higher positions in the government were entirely given over to mawālī.

He states:

The Caliph al-Mansūr (the second 'Abbāsīd ruler) was the first one who appointed his clients for governmental offices and he gave preferences to them over the Arabs. This policy was enhanced after al-Mansūr, such that the mastery and governorship of the Arabs came to an end.²⁴

From the time of al-Mansūr it appears that the mawālī of the 'Abbāsīds dominated the government. The administration and military were not the only things affected by mawālī during the early 'Abbāsīd period. Many cultural influences were also felt, from poetry and literature, such as the famous poet Abū Nuwās, to things such as music and games.²⁵ Thus, the mawālī in the army and administration brought with them more than fighting power and clerical adeptness, they brought change to the Arab culture that was once so insistently "pure".

²³ Mohsen Zakeri, "Sāsānid Soldiers in Early Muslim Society A Discussion Of Historical Continuities," (Ph. D. diss., The University of Utah, 1993), 192.

²⁴ Al-Suyūtī as quoted in Mahmood Shakib, "The Influence of Persian Culture During the Early 'Abbasid Times: A Study of Abū Nuwās' Poetry." (Ph. D. diss., University of Washington, 1982), 22.

²⁵ For great examples of the many things affected by Persian culture see Ibid., 49-67.

The Abnā'

This group consists of a very wide and varied constituency. The Abnā' are spoken of as being both in Baghdād (Iraq), and also in Khurāsān. During the 'Abbāsīd revolution the Abnā' were those who supported it from the area of Khurāsān. Many of them came from mixed Arab/Persian descent and/or from the various elite families of the local Sassanian nobility.²⁶ An unusual piece of evidence that has often not been used to show the Iranian ancestry of the Abnā' are the weapons and armor used by them. Jāhiz describes them as saying:

We have drums that strike terror into the foe and large banner; and we possess coats of mail and bells and epaulettes and long hair, and twisted sheaths and curbed moustaches and muslin caps and shahriyya steeds and the club and battle axe is in our pack saddles and the daggers are at our waists. And we know how to sit elegantly on our horses' backs.²⁷

Later, he also notes that, "the Persians used the long lance for infantry, and such lances are employed by the Abnā' in the entrance of trenches and defiles."²⁸ During the 'Abbāsīd revolution the Abnā' played an important part. Though it has been shown by Sharon that the large majority of the leadership was Arab, the success of the revolution lay in part to the involvement of many soldiers of Persian/Arab mix.²⁹ After the revolution, the Abnā' split into two groups, based on geographical areas. Those who went to Baghdād continued to support the 'Abbāsīd regime and their descendants became the often talked about Abnā' of Baghdād during the civil war, while those who stayed in Khurāsān generally continued their allegiance to the 'Abbāsīds, though the region was often plunged into chaotic rebellions. What link

²⁶ For more information see Crone, 65-66; Zakeri, 320, 325; S.S. Aga, "The Arab Population in Hurasan during the Umayyad Period," *Arabica* 46 (1999): 224.

²⁷ Zakeri, 340.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 340.

²⁹ Moshe Sharon, *Black Banners from the East: The Establishment of the 'Abbasid State—Incubation of a Revolt*, The Max Schloessinger Memorial Series (The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Leiden: The Magnes Press, E.J. Brill, 1983), 198. Moshe Sharon, *Revolt: The Social and Military Aspects of the 'Abbasid Revolution*, The Max Schloessinger Memorial Series (The Hebrew University, Jerusalem: The Max Schloessinger Memorial Fund, 1990), 32. See also Aga: 224.

between the two parts of the original Abnā' continued to exist after the revolution is not really known. They likely kept in contact because of various tribal and familial interests, but it seems certain that rifts developed which later pitted the two parts against each other during the civil war between al-Ma'mūn and al-Amīn.³⁰

The Abnā' served many functions for the 'Abbāsids, most of which involved either the army or the bureaucracy. Scholars generally agree that they made up the backbone of the new 'Abbāsīd army, in effect taking up the position of the Syrians and Umayyads, who had been defeated in the 'Abbāsīd revolution, in the new 'Abbāsīd military hierarchy. In general, they are described as heavy cavalry when describing the Abnā' in Khurāsān, and this is also shown in various accounts we have surrounding al-Amīn's efforts to use them against al-Ma'mūn's army outside of Baghdād. However, they are also described as infantry when described in Baghdād. For instance, Kennedy states:

the emphasis is on their role as infantry ('we walk towards the spears') and in hand-to-hand fighting, with knives and daggers if necessary. They boast of their expertise in scaling and breaking into city walls and in amphibious warfare. Above all they are skilled in street fighting, at the gates of *Khandaqs*, in the alleys (*aziqqa*), in the markets and in the villages.³¹

The 'Abbāsids placed a great deal of reliance on the Abnā' of Baghdād to be the backbone of the army. There is no doubt that the Abnā' were proud of their martial abilities, and if what Tayfūr (a writer in the ninth century, 204-280AH (819/820-893AD)) describes below is true, then the place of honor they held was well founded. In one portion of his *Kitāb Baghdād* he addresses various groups' abilities, lauding the Abnā' as being better than the Turks, mawālī, or Khurāsānīs, describing:

³⁰ One such rift may have been 'Alid support. The 'Abbāsids vigorously persecuted the 'Alids, but many Khurāsānīs continued to be sympathetic to their cause.

³¹ Hugh Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs: Military and Society in the Early Islamic State* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001; reprint, London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 105 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

As for the Abnā', I never saw the like of them. They are tireless and indefatigable and invincible. They fight in the bitterest cold wearing shabby (?) waist-wrappers, without a cuirass and without an armour and without a shield. Once [they fight] with a sword, once with a lance and once with arrows. They waded through icy rivers and they waded through fire in the midday heat. They are tireless and indefatigable.³²

Though Tayfūr describes their fighting abilities as unequaled, they also played important roles in the leadership of the administration. With the advent of the revolution the Umayyad system of government that clearly favored Arabs came to an end. Though many high offices seem to have remained in Arab hands, likely given to members of the 'Abbāsid family, a distribution of governorships and other high positions to non-Arabs, who were Abnā', also took place. The advent of 'Abbāsid administration emphasized Muslim religious affiliation and de-emphasized Arabs and tribal affiliations (as seen through Abū Muslim's military payment reforms).³³

There can be no doubt that the Abnā' as a group bound themselves to the 'Abbāsid family. The religious propaganda used by the 'Abbāsids created a particularly strong brand of loyalty. In the early period, the 'Abbāsids used a number of religiously oriented policies that helped to insure loyalty of the Khurāsānīs who favored Hashimite causes. For instance, the 'Abbāsids used the term *da'wah* in conjunction with their efforts to gather support. This term, meaning "invitation," would gather followers so that a return (*dawla*) to the "divine order of Muhammad" could be accomplished.³⁴ As part of the return to the correct ways of Muhammad, the 'Abbāsids emphasized the leadership of an *imām* from the house of the Prophet.

Thus, the Abnā' saw themselves as the saviors of Islam by overthrowing the corrupt

³² Tayfūr in Ayalon, "Military," 31. It might be interesting to further research the attributes given to the various military groups of the time. Often they seem to carry remarkably similar language and characteristics. This might show that either names of different groups were just substituted and the characteristics mostly remained the same, and/or it would also show what martial qualities were seen as most important during this time period.

³³ See Sharon, *Revolt*, 257-8; Sharon, "Military;" Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: the Islamic Near East from the sixth to the eleventh century*, 2nd ed. (London: Pearson Education Limited, 1986), 133-4 (Page citations are to the second edition).

³⁴ Sharon, *Black*, 22-24.

Umayyads and placing a leader from the family of the Prophet on the throne. By using symbols and slogans such as these, they gathered the Hashimite-leaning Khurāsānīs to their cause who soon came to revere their leaders as God-given. After the revolution, their place among the army, *shurta* (police), and administration in Baghdād seems to have assured their tie with the ‘Abbāsids. The civil war between al-Ma’mūn and al-Amīn strained the relationship, but in the end both rivals were part of the ‘Abbāsīd house and the Abnā’ became polarized between the two according to where they were located—those in Baghdād siding with al-Amīn (no doubt in part to try and safeguard their positions in the administration and army) and those in Khurāsān with al-Ma’mūn (who used many of the same religious propaganda tactics as the revolution to gain support). The most important point is that prior to al-Ma’mūn the Abnā’ in Baghdād seemed to have adjusted quickly to the new climate and taken advantage of being abnā’ al-dawla by taking pride in their part of the revolution and gaining many important positions in the ‘Abbāsīd administration and military.

‘*Ulamā*’

The ‘*ulamā*’ is also a group that is very hard to categorize. As far as ethnicity is concerned, they were a mixed group. Arabs and non-Arabs were both part of this group because membership in it was characterized by scholarship and not ethnicity. The functions that they performed varied widely and the ninth century in particular was one of evolution for the ‘*ulamā*’ and religious law. The ‘Abbāsīds seem to have relied on them for help with legitimization and they grew in power and influence as a result of the patronage of the upper classes. Because of their importance and proximity to the caliph, this section will concentrate mainly on ‘*ulamā*’ living in and around Baghdad.

Their clear functions during the early 'Abbāsids were the transmittal of *hadīth* and *sunna*, and issues having to do with religious law. During the second and third century A.H. *hadīth* and *sunna* took on new meaning and importance, and '*ulamā*' were the experts, giving them a distinct advantage. For some '*ulamā*' their life revolved around transmission of these important sayings and actions, such that their lifestyle depended on their ability. Others went into the judiciary where they became *mufīīs*, *qādīs* (judges) and other court officials, which would give them a salary for their work. Some found patrons that would support them in their study, others used their knowledge as a professional career where they would be paid in order to transmit their knowledge, and still others relied on a non-religious occupation for income.³⁵ As a result of these functions, '*ulamā*' had great power and influence over both common people and with the upper class. Baghdād during the 'Abbāsīd period became the unparalleled city for culture and study, which attracted intellectuals and '*ulamā*'. Not only was the royal court here, but comparatively large portion of the wealth of the empire ended up there, drawing scholars from all over the Islamic world.

Because of their power and prestige among both the popular and upper classes, combined with the great influence they wielded in Baghdād, their support was a pivotal point for the 'Abbāsids. In general, '*ulamā*' supported the 'Abbāsids and the caliphate. Because of the nature of the relationship between the two, they often seemed to have the same interests and were willing to support each other.³⁶ Of course this was not always the case. Crone, in particular, sees a constant battle waging between the two powers, '*ulamā*' and the caliph. In her view, the 'Abbāsīd caliphs

³⁵ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Religion and Politics Under the Early 'Abbasids: The Emergence of the Proto-Sunni Elite*, Islamic History and Civilization Studies and Texts, eds. Ulrich Haarman and Wadad Kadi, vol. 16. (Leiden, New York, Koln: Brill, 1997), 163; Cl. Gilliot, "'Ulamā'," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new version.

³⁶ Zaman, 167-89.

were forced to conform to *'ulamā'* or risk the withdrawal of legitimizing influence that they wielded with the masses.³⁷ The battle lines were drawn with accepting patronage or position from the 'Abbāsīd government, which some scholars refused to fulfill. On the other hand, *'ulamā'* might be seen as a threat to the authority of the caliph, though this did not show itself until al-Ma'mūn's reign.³⁸ This "no love lost" theory finds some support in the rebellion of Muhammad and Ibrāhīm in 145AH (762AD). Many prominent members of the *'ulamā'* were said to have supported the rebellion: Mālīk b. Anas, Abū Hanīfa, Mis'ar b. Kidām, Muhammad b. 'Ajlān, Ibn Abī Dhi'b, 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Muttalib al-Mukhzūmī, and many others, each of whom held positions of authority.³⁹ A lack of support from these scholars, two of whom became founding fathers of two of the four *madhhabs*, shows that certain groups of the *'ulamā'* certainly opposed the rule of the 'Abbāsīds—even if they did not actively go out and fight against them.

Though some *'ulamā'* were obviously opposed to 'Abbāsīd rule, the 'Abbāsīds made great efforts to employ the help of the *'ulamā'*. Principally around the time of the revolution, 'Abbāsīd propagandists made a sustained effort to garner support for themselves in *'ulamā'* circles.⁴⁰ The effort to enlist *'ulamā'* support was helped by other things throughout the early 'Abbāsīd period. For instance, near the end of the early 'Abbāsīd period support grew for the political quietism of *'ulamā'*.⁴¹ In addition, proto-Sunni attitudes were also becoming less favorable towards 'Alid ideas, somewhat paralleling the 'Abbāsīd's desire to separate themselves from their earlier Shī'ite ideology.⁴² In some cases they helped one another and *'ulamā'*

³⁷ Crone, 69-71.

³⁸ Ibid., 93-4.

³⁹ Zaman, 73-74.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 71.

⁴¹ Ibid., 76.

⁴² Ibid., 76.

benefited from the learning and patronage found in the positive environment of Baghdād. This close environment created the necessary interaction with ideas from all over the empire, giving the intellectual culture of Baghdād a boost as it sought to answer questions and formulate doctrine and law. One specific example of cooperation between the *'ulamā'* and the caliphs was that the Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd use of *jihād* raids into Byzantine lands to influence support for him among the *'ulamā'*, which he then used in a combination of *'ulamā'* support and military action against various groups that might have threatened his power.⁴³

There are many indicators showing that the 'Abbāsīd caliphs took great interest in religious life and were not only military "generals". Accounts tell that al-Mansūr "had roamed the earth...written [down] Hadīth and acted as a transmitter in mosques" and, in addition, he "remained well known for seeking *ilm*, *fiqh* and *athar*."⁴⁴ Al-Mansūr was not the only caliph to take an active interest—al-Ma'mūn also actively transmitted, one time narrating more than forty traditions to Isma'īl b. Sugayh.⁴⁵ That the caliphs took a direct interest in religion should not be surprising, because they were educated by *'ulamā'* as part of their childhood educational curriculum. Al-Ma'mūn was trained in *hadīth* and trained in *fiqh* under Hasan b. Ziyād al-Lu'lu'ī, becoming an expert in Hanafī law.⁴⁶ Caliphs also made an effort to be perceived as scholars in their own right. By doing this they defended their legitimacy on many fronts, forged links with the *'ulamā'*, and were shown to be generous patrons both in monetary and intellectual support.⁴⁷

⁴³ Michael Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence and Holy War: Studies in the Jihad and the Arab-Byzantine Frontier*, American Oriental Series, eds. Paul W. Kroll, Maynard P. Maidman, and Jeanette A. Wakin, vol. 81 (New Haven, Connecticut: American Oriental Society, 1996), 146.

⁴⁴ Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious authority in the first centuries of Islam*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; Cambridge University, 2003), 84.

⁴⁵ Zaman, 126.

⁴⁶ John Abdallah Nawas, "Al-Ma'mūn: Mihna and Caliphate," (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of Nijmegen, 1993), 15.

⁴⁷ Good examples are found in Zaman, 129-133, 148-153, 164.

This support went both ways, 'ulamā' also supported the caliphate, which contrasts with Crone's view. Though written after the early 'Abbāsids, Ibn Taymiyya's (661-728AH (1263-1328AD)) thoughts ring true during this period also:

It should be shown that the exercise of authority (for the benefit) of the people is (one) of the greatest religious duties. Neither Religion nor world order may be established without it...It is necessary that being in authority should be considered as (a part of) Religion and as a good action that brings one nearer to Allāh.⁴⁸

Ibn Taymiyya's words show that the act of being caliph, as one who leads people, is in essence a good act and favorable to God. Ibn Taymiyya's opinion echoes Al-Māwardī (364-450AH (974-1058AD)) in speaking about the caliphate, saying, "Its establishment is unanimously considered to be obligatory on the Community, al-Asamm being the sole dissenter."⁴⁹ Zaman brings to light three different documents that show 'ulamā' as casting a favorable light on the caliph. First, Ibn al-Mu'qāffa's (102-139AH (720-757AD)) *Risāla fī'l Sahāba*.⁵⁰ This document is most famous for its call for the creation of a uniform legal system. As part of this, it shows the caliph as the supreme religious authority, where the caliph has the ability to promulgate legal decisions, codes, etc.,. The role of the 'ulamā' is as functionaries of the caliph, as his companions, advisors and as "moral administrators".⁵¹

Second, the letter of a Basra qādī named 'Ubayd Allāh b. al-Hasan al-'Anbarī, which mostly deals with administrative matters.⁵² This letter seems to foreshadow what would become the orthodox doctrine on the caliphate. His letter shows that the caliph has responsibilities to make legal decisions, after other sources have been

⁴⁸ Ibn Taymiyya, *Ibn Taymiyya on Public and Private Law in Islam Or Public Policy in Islamic Jurisprudence*, trans. Omar A. Farrukh (Beirut: Khayats Books, 1966), 187, 189.

⁴⁹ Al-Māwardī, *Al-Akhām al-Sultāniyya w'al-Wilāyāt al-Dīniyya (The Ordinances of Government)*, trans. by Wafaa H. Wahba (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing Limited, 1996; Garnet Publishing Limited, 2000), 3.

⁵⁰ For these three documents see Zaman, 83-100.

⁵¹ Ibid., 83-84.

⁵² Recorded by Wakī' (d. 306AH (918AD)) in *Akhbār al-Qudāt*, see Ibid., 85.

exhausted, namely the *Qur'ān*, *sunna* of the Prophet, and *ijma'* of the leading scholars. Lest this passage be taken as a total seclusion of the caliph from authority in rare cases, he also states:

In such matters confronting the people about which the *a'imma* are perturbed, and which are not regulated by the *Qur'ān* or the *sunna* of the Prophet, no one is to have precedence over the *walī amr al-muslimīn* and the *imām jamā'atihim*. Such matters are not to be decided without him; rather it is incumbent on those who are subordinate to him to refer these matters to him and to accept his ruling on them.⁵³

This paragraph, talking about the caliph and not a governor, provides the insight that the caliph was believed to be an important part of the process, and in fact invaluable.

In making these and other decisions the caliph should not be without help. Al-

'Anbarī states that the caliph needs to:

have with him a select group of people who are truthful, have knowledge of the *sunna*, and are men of worldly experience (*hunka*), intellect, and piety, to help him deal with and decide on such public matters as are brought to him.... For though God has bestowed on the Commander of the Faithful knowledge of His book and *sunna* the affairs of the people of this *umma* keep pouring in so that attending to some of them causes him to neglect others;... [having an advisory council] will, God willing, be a real help in these circumstances.⁵⁴

As stated by al-'Anbarī, the caliph's job is a tremendous one, requiring help from 'ulamā' who are seen as the caliph's helpers, not as a power in and of themselves. On the whole al-'Anbarī's letter shows the caliph both as subject to the 'ulamā' (they define *sunna*, which the caliph should follow) and also as subject to him and his helpers in his duties.

Lastly, the *Kitāb al-kharāj* written by Abū Yūsuf (182AH (798AD)), which also shows a pro-caliphal policy. Three facts demonstrate this outlook, first, Abū Yūsuf views 'ulamā' as holders of religious authority, but also that the caliph has a "special light" to help him make decisions.⁵⁵ Second, he advocates political quietism.

⁵³ Trans. and quotation in Ibid., 88.

⁵⁴ Trans. and quotation in Ibid., 91.

⁵⁵ These are adapted from Zaman's analysis.

Third, he clearly demonstrates his partiality to the 'Abbāsīd cause by doing things such as clearly announcing that they are part of the "*ahl al-bayt*" and giving them a much larger share in 'Umar I's *dīwān* (limiting 'Alī's share to a friend, not as a family member). These and other things clearly show his support of the 'Abbāsīd family and reign, with the '*ulamā*'s role as that of trusted and pious administrators and to "revive" the *sunna*.⁵⁶ Each of these three documents differ somewhat on the exact specifics of their pro-'Abbāsīd and pro-caliph stances, but these opinions are identifiable and show that in large part '*ulamā*' did not see the caliph as an obstacle that needed to be overcome, and that they were largely willing to accept the 'Abbāsīd caliphs as a necessary part of the Islamic religion.

The relationship between these two groups goes further than a willingness to accept each other, they often cooperated for mutual interests. The proto-Sunni view that 'Alī had no special knowledge given to him in order to guide the community was also used by the 'Abbāsīds as they began asserting the authority of al-'Abbas (the uncle of the Prophet) over that of 'Alī. Though at first the 'Abbāsīds also used a number of messianic messages and ideologies, once in power they pushed them to the side as well (in much the same manner as al-Ma'mūn would eventually do). This move was seconded by the '*ulamā*' who also actively discouraged messianic overtones. In fact, many Sunni ideas evolved through collaboration with the caliphs and the '*ulamā*', not in opposition.⁵⁷ Combined with general '*ulamā*' support for those in power, and the patronage that they received from these same people, the symbiosis between these two groups becomes starkly evident, neither could exist without the other, both maintained an important societal role. As stated before, the caliphs wished to be viewed as scholars in and of themselves, and many were

⁵⁶ Ibid., 101.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 184.

educated by religious scholars. Even Ibn Hanbal, famous for his role in opposing al-Ma'mūn's *mihna*, recognized the caliph's role in religious life and the importance of having a caliph.⁵⁸

The role of '*ulamā*' in the early 'Abbāsid caliphate showed itself to be one of cooperation with, not opposition to, the caliphate. Though some opposition existed, most '*ulamā*' worked in coordination with the government, and with patronage from those in power to develop Islamic thought, and not usurp the authority of the caliphs. Inevitably this contrasts with Crone's and Pipe's views (especially Crone's) that the enmity between the caliph and the '*ulamā*' caused a failure of the Islamic polity, but, as has been shown, the relationship was actually one of cooperation with relatively minor disturbances.

Al-Kuttāb, the Secretaries

The secretaries were another important group in the early 'Abbāsid time period, particularly in Baghdad. The large majority of them were non-Arab and they fulfilled many different duties. Not surprisingly, their positions were mostly bureaucratic and generally they played the role of an intermediary between the caliph and the common people. For example, the important role of vizier was a bureaucratic office that mediated between the caliph and his subjects. Their primary support to the 'Abbāsids came in conjunction with their bureaucratic expertise of running a large and complex government.⁵⁹ Because of the role they played, many of the kuttāb lived in or around Baghdād. Particularly in the 'Abbāsid period, the growth of the bureaucracy increased and thus the role of the kuttāb also increased.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 116-7, 197-9; Ann K.S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory: The Jurists*, London Oriental Series, vol. 36 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 42.

⁵⁹ See W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*. (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 1973; reprint, Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), 170.

The power of the *kuttāb* over the 'Abbāsids is epitomized by the Barmakids, a family intimately involved in the administration during the time of Harūn al-Rashīd. Prior to Harūn's ascension to the caliphate, he was educated by Yahya the Barmakid. This engendered a long alliance with them and eventually with their support he became caliph. Barmakid influence did not end with Harūn's ascension, Yahya's son, Ja'far, was one of the closest friends of Harūn. In addition, Ja'far was entrusted with the education of Harūn's son, al-Ma'mūn. As close friends, governors, advisors, and allies, the influence of the Barmakids at its height was extremely pervasive. Perhaps resulting from their influence, Harūn chose a more moderate stand towards the Shī'ites. In addition, the Barmakids seem to have favored a more absolute form of religion, perhaps harkening back to earlier Sassanian times and their roots in the Eastern provinces where a king held absolute authority.⁶⁰ However, their influence gradually waned and in 187AH (803AD) the fall of the Barmakids was complete, Harūn had shucked off Barmakid influence and continued on his own.⁶¹ The Barmakids' actions increased the power of the bureaucracy and of the Persian *mawālī*. Various movements within this educated class, such as the *Shu'ūbiyya* movement, disliked Arab literature, but also led to the translation into Arabic of a great deal of literature from other cultures.⁶² In addition, if what Watt says is true, there was a constant struggle between the two educated classes, the '*ulamā*' and the *kuttāb*.⁶³ What all this means to the 'Abbāsids is that by the *kuttāb* intertwining themselves into the 'Abbāsīd government, and counter-balancing the '*ulamā*', the *kuttāb* were a constant source of support to the 'Abbāsids because of their vested interests, and one

⁶⁰ Kennedy, *Prophet*, 141.

⁶¹ See *Ibid.*, 138-142 for a good, brief, account of the rise, influence, and fall of the Barmakids.

⁶² This movement began as an pro-Iranian group who believed their culture was superior to Arab culture, see Watt, 172-3; See also S. Enderwitz, "Shu'ūbiyya", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new version; Roy P. Mottehadah, *The Shu'ūbiyya Controversy and the Social History of Early Islamic Iran*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 7, no. 2 (April, 1976): 161-182.

⁶³ Watt, 174-5.

that might be played off of the *'ulamā'* in order to keep them under control in terms of influence in the government and society at large.

Shī'ites

One of the most difficult issues of early Islam, and in particular with the period prior to, and during, al-Ma'mūn's reign is the fluidity between the various groups that would later become so prominent, such as the Sunnis and Shī'ites. Particularly at this time, the solid groupings of Sunnis and Shī'ites did not exist. It wasn't until later that the groups we now know as Shī'ites would have a specific belief system independent of Sunnis, like we find later in the century. Thus, when Shī'ites are mentioned, they might be more appropriately termed proto-Shī'ites. For our purposes, these proto-Shī'ites were generally those who were descendants of 'Alī ('Alids) or supporters of those descendants and were politically active at some point in the early 'Abbāsīd period. For many, political activity seemed to be the norm, and the function that the 'Alids seem to have often carried out was one of rebellion, especially in southern Iraq. However, Khurāsān also had large numbers of sympathetic supporters for the Shī'ite cause. This probably resulted from the number of groups that immigrated to Khurāsān with familial links to southern Iraq.⁶⁴ The major difference between southern Iraq and Khurāsān comes from the fact that most of the major rebellions that tried to replace the 'Abbāsīd caliph came from southern Iraq and not Khurāsān, which Sharon points out was one of the reasons for the success of the 'Abbāsīds using Khurāsān in the first place—virgin soil.⁶⁵ Most Shī'ite backed rebellions took place either in southern Iraq or in the Hijaz.

⁶⁴ See Sharon, *Black*.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 70, 65.

Because of group fluidity in this period, it is no surprise that 'Abbāsīd support among Shī'ites also tended to be fluid. The 'Abbāsīds and Shī'ites tended toward rivalry, stemming from the 'Abbāsīd revolution, which largely used 'Alid support in the beginning and then later took on a character of its own. However, many of the Shī'ites who supported the movement in the beginning because of its promises to place a leader from the "family of the Prophet" on the throne became disenchanted once they realized that the 'Abbāsīds had no intent to place an 'Alid descendant on the throne, but instead began to include themselves as part of the "family of the Prophet." As a result, the 'Abbāsīd and Shī'ite relationship and support varied depending on time period and issue. In general, the Shī'ites did not accept the 'Abbāsīd revolution because an 'Alid had not taken the throne, and therefore their hopes for returning to the purity of rule through the Prophet's descendants never came about.⁶⁶ Over time, the 'Abbāsīds seemed to be leaning away from their Shī'ite heritage and towards the more popular support of the Sunnis.⁶⁷ As the 'Abbāsīds drew closer to proto-Sunni viewpoints, they generally also became increasingly antagonistic towards the Shī'ites and their sympathizers.

Dissatisfaction with 'Abbāsīd leadership is easily shown through the successive pro-'Alid, Shī'ite, rebellions during the early 'Abbāsīd period. Two Shī'ite rebellions are good examples of those that took place prior to the caliphate of al-Ma'mūn and demonstrate the tenuous support Shī'ites gave to the 'Abbāsīds. First, in 145AH (762AD) Muhammad "the Pure Soul" Nafs al-Zakiyya rebelled against the 'Abbāsīds. Much of his support came from those in Medina, but it also spread to Basra where his brother, Ibrāhīm, declared rebellion and raised a large army.⁶⁸ Like

⁶⁶ Crone, 68-9.

⁶⁷ Sharon, *Black*, 84-93.

⁶⁸ Hugh Kennedy, *The Early Abbasid Caliphate: A Political History* (London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1981; Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1981), 199-204.

each of the three major rebellions (the other two are discussed below), it was based on a Shī'ite ideology where a leader descended from the Prophet would take control of the caliphate and thus have the ability to lead the community correctly. The size of the rebellion showed the popular support that Ibrāhīm found in and around Basra. At one point his army supposedly numbered 100,000 and he controlled the cities of Fars, Ahwāz, and Wasit.⁶⁹ Eventually defeated, Muhammad and Ibrāhīm are an example of the threat posed by the Shī'ites during this early period.

The second rebellion exploded in 169AH (786AD). Once again in Medina a rebellion led by Husayn b. 'Alī appeared. This rebellion by all accounts was rather small, and his primary supporters came from among his own family. However, this time the population of Medina did nothing to help him and seems to have greatly disliked him. The important issue in his rebellion was that many 'Alids did not support him. Twenty years prior to this rebellion, Muhammad and Ibrāhīm's rebellion seems to have had broad based popular support, but Husayn's shows an excellent example of the fluidity of support surrounding Shī'ites because he did not seem to benefit from the popular support enjoyed by Muhammad and Ibrāhīm. The temptation to view this movement as a change in attitude towards the 'Abbāsids by Shī'ites in Medina is shown as false because, Nasr b. Shabīb's took a trip from the Jazīra to Medina in 199AH (815AD) in the hopes of finding an 'Alid leader to help with a rebellion in the Jazīra, demonstrating that Medina remained a place of discontent.⁷⁰ Though this particular trip failed to get the support Nasr b. Shabīb hoped for, the leader he chose to lead his rebellion, Muhammad b. Ibrāhīm b.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 202. See also Al-Tabarī, vol. 3, part 1 : 298-304.

⁷⁰ Kennedy, *Early*, 207.

Tabātabā, found employment on his return to Medina by helping to raise a rebellion in Kufa.⁷¹

One caveat must be given to the above examples of rebellions. In rebellions such as Muhammad and Ibrāhīm's not all of their supporters were likely Shī'ites. Many other groups of people would support Shī'ite revolts as a way to either regain position and power previously held or as a protest against the current government. For many rebellions then, they were rarely purely 'Alid rebellions and were often flash points for other dissident groups. As a result of the many Shī'ite ideological rebellions taking place, of which these two were only examples, their position relative to supporting the 'Abbāsids is somewhat hard to determine. One might generally say that the antagonism between the 'Abbāsids and Shī'ites prior to al-Ma'mūn's caliphate varied according to the caliph in power and his policies; however, a definite and sustained conflict existed between the two. It seems as though the 'Alids began to espouse political quietism on a larger scale, and while they had no particular love for the 'Abbāsids, the many failed smaller uprisings show that getting wide support within the Shī'ite community was difficult. In the period prior to al-Ma'mūn, the 'Abbāsids continued to drift away from their original pro-Shī'ite ideology, seeing their once allies as their most feared ideological challenge. In order to overcome this challenge they began to change the basis of their ideology, for instance, from one based on a transfer of authority from an 'Alid to one of where 'Alī was not worthy of the caliphate and that their authority came straight from al-'Abbas, as the male inheritor of the Prophet's power and calling. This change in ideology forced the 'Abbāsids to rely on the proto-Sunni *'ulamā'*.

⁷¹ Ibid., 207-8.

Other Groups

Many other groups existed, and this paper's purpose is not to give a comprehensive study on all extant groups of the period; however, some smaller groups in the early 'Abbāsīd period would come to have a significant effect during the time of al-Ma'mūn, but that also had existed prior to his reign.

One of these lesser influential groups were the Syrians. Most of this group consisted of tribal Arabs, many of whom lived in and around Syria and would often be called upon as an auxiliary corps for the army. However, because of their intimate connections with the Umayyads, their influence sharply decreased with the rise of the 'Abbāsīds. One cannot imagine much support coming from the Syrians, though just prior to al-Ma'mūn the caliph al-Amīn was said to have favored the Arabs and called upon them to help him in his battle against al-Ma'mūn's armies.⁷²

The 'ayyarūn represent another of these groups. Though often known as the young "gangs", "ruffians", and "naked ones" that defended Baghdād at the end of the war between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn, this group actually descended from the Sassanian landed lower aristocracy.⁷³ Prior to the civil war this group seems hardly mentioned in the historical accounts, but if we identify them with the *banāwī*, *Abnā'*, *asāwira*, and the *dihqāns* as part of the ex-Sassanian hierarchy, we should be able to attribute to them some support for the early 'Abbāsīd dynasty, perhaps even more so when one reads the accounts of their fierceness in support of Baghdād during the civil war, so much so that one poet stated:

The markets of Karkh are closed
and its 'ayyārān and passerby are bewildered.
The war has produced from the dregs (arāzil)

⁷² This incident will be further explained later in conjunction with the circumstances surrounding al-Ma'mūn's rise to power; however, for an interesting account of this call-to-arms by al-Amīn to the Syrians see Ayalon, "Military."

⁷³ Zakeri 8-13. He also explains how the 'ayyārān and 'ayyarūn are the same group. For this reason, this paper will use both names to show the influence this group had during the early 'Abbāsīds.

fighting lions, braver than heroes of the field.⁷⁴

The length of the siege of Baghdād is a testament to their ferocity and courage even when faced with what should have been better troops. Zakeri clearly shows that they were a part of the 'Abbāsīd support network, though often misunderstood.

Lastly, the Mu'tazilites also played an important role. A large number of the historical accounts concentrate on their influence during al-Ma'mūn's reign, and many modern authors have attributed many different things to their influence during his reign.⁷⁵ Prior to al-Ma'mūn relatively little is known about them. They were definitely part of the 'ulamā', but created their own specialty. Their desire was to use non-Arab methods (mainly Greek thought) to combat foreign religions (mainly Christianity) and to defend Islam. In essence, their school of thought made reason, rather than traditions, the best form for divining truth. However, just like most 'ulamā', the Mu'tazilite creeds at this time were not necessarily solidified, and not all Mu'tazilites shared the exact same belief.⁷⁶ Nawas gives five different characteristics that set them apart from other scholars, and this helps explain why al-Ma'mūn is so often seen as holding Mu'tazilite beliefs.

1. *Asl al-tawhīd* (the principle of absolute unity) – States that God is absolutely indivisible, in the strictest sense. (From this principle came the idea of the createdness of the Qur'ān.)
2. *Asl al-'adl* (principle of justice) – God is just, man has free will and evil is the product of man's own choices and conduct.
3. *Asl al-wa'd wa al-wa'id* (principle of promise and threat) – the good and bad consequences that accrue because of free will.
4. *Asl al-manzila bayn al-manzilatayn* (principle of the position between the two positions) – Assures the salvation status of sinners within the *umma*.
5. *Asl al-amr bi-al-ma'rūf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar* (principle of commanding the good and preventing evil) – A general duty of all Muslims. Their

⁷⁴ Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawhar* (*Les Prairies d'Or*), vol. 4, Text and trans. by C. Barbier de Maynard. Collection d'Ouvrages Orientaux (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1873), 284. English translation quoted in Zakeri, 346.

⁷⁵ One of the most prevelant is Dominique Sourdel, "La Politique Religieuse du Calife 'Abbāsīd al-Ma'mūn," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* 30, no. 1 (1962): 27-48.

⁷⁶ Our knowledge of the Mu'tazilites is complicated by the fact that their beliefs don't appear to have been written down until after most of them had disappeared.

emphasis on it cause controversy on who has authority to do it, what is evil, how far one should go to do it, etc.,⁷⁷

Each of these principles could be easily said to relate to al-Ma'mūn, his concept of the caliphate, and his methods. In large part they, were found in Northern Iraq and particularly in Baghdād. Also, there doesn't seem to be any significant deviation from the normal '*ulamā*' support that was given to the 'Abbāsids as a whole. This changes with the caliphate of al-Ma'mūn, mostly because several of his friends and advisors are Mu'tazilites. As a result, their influence probably grew, and for this reason many modern scholars have emphasized the Mu'tazilite—al-Ma'mūn connection.

Each of these groups were important in the early 'Abbāsīd period and either supported the regime or, at the very least, influenced how the 'Abbāsīds used their power and wielded their authority. Of the above groups, most of them supported the 'Abbāsīds. Though some might have given only nominal support, they each had a part in forming the power basis that pre-civil war 'Abbāsīd power rested upon. As a result, when these groups were disrupted during and after the civil war between al-Ma'mūn and al-Amīn, changes had to take place, causing al-Ma'mūn to face two important crises upon his ascent to the throne.

⁷⁷ Nawas, "al-Ma'mūn," 10-11. Nawas has the best brief explanation and summary, but Watt should be used for a more in-depth study.

IV. THE CRISES OF AL-MA'MŪN'S REIGN

*Royal authority and large-scale dynastic power are attained only through a group and group feeling. –Ibn Khaldūn*⁷⁸

The political crises of al-Ma'mūn's reign resulted from the method of al-Ma'mūn's succession, the change in influence of prior power groups, and the introduction of a new power group. This upset the balance of power in place prior to al-Ma'mūn's reign, especially since the changes were caused by the advent of a civil war, the caliph al-Amīn's death, and the introduction of new groups to the social structure. Two of the most important crises sparked by these changes were those of support and of legitimacy.

Al-Ma'mūn's Crisis of Support

Most 'ulamā' of the period agreed that the caliphate was an obligatory position of leadership in Islam.⁷⁹ It was needed to guide and unite the community. As a result, a relatively complex set of rules of succession were used, and at least nominal support for the caliph was customary. Often, the 'Abbāsids used nomination as the preferred method of passing the caliphal position to their heirs. Once nomination occurred, it could not technically be revoked; however, the reality of the situation demonstrated that nominations did not insure succession to the caliphate.⁸⁰ For instance, this happened to al-Ma'mūn's father, Harūn al-Rashīd, and almost happened to al-Ma'mūn in the midst of the struggle between himself and his brother,

⁷⁸ Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Muqaddima*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (*The Muqaddima: An Introduction to History*) 3 vols., ed. and abridged by N.J. Dawood, Bollingen Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969; reprint, Princeton: Princeton University, 1989), 123. Hereafter cited as "Ibn Khaldūn."

⁷⁹ For example, see Al-Māwardī, *Al-Akhām al-Sultāniyya wa'l-Wilāyāt al-Dīniyya* (*The Ordinances of Government*), trans. by Wafaa H. Wahba (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing Limited, 1996; Garnet Publishing Limited, 2000), 3.

⁸⁰ Anwar Chejne, *Succession to the Rule in Islam: With Special Reference to the Early 'Abbasid Period* (Kashmiri Bazar, Lahore, Pakistan: Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1960), 43-5.

when al-Amīn tried to replace al-Ma'mūn with his own son, Mūsā.⁸¹ However, the struggle for succession was only one aspect of the trouble between al-Ma'mūn and al-Amīn. The civil war that occurred between them has been the study of a number of scholars, each assigning blame to one party or the other, though many agree that al-Amīn is made to appear in the wrong. One of the primary ways that al-Amīn went wrong was with the succession nomination. Harūn, in the hope that it would prevent civil war after his death, created a document that delineated the order of succession: al-Amīn, al-Ma'mūn, and then another brother, al-Qasim. He went to great lengths to have al-Amīn, al-Ma'mūn and important leaders of the time at the same place (the Ka'ba), at the same time (during the pilgrimage), and had them swear that they would fulfill the document's decrees, which he then hung on the wall of the Ka'ba.⁸² In this document al-Amīn was heir to the caliphate, but al-Ma'mūn was given almost autonomous control of the Eastern provinces and designated as the successor to al-Amīn. Harūn's efforts to make the document binding are obvious; everything about the document was associated with the holiest actions and places of Islam, but it still did not last. As tensions rose between the two brothers after Harūn's death, al-Amīn, in an act that was a precursor of the violence to come, had the document torn from the wall of the Ka'ba, brought to him, and then he tore it into pieces and burned it, afterwards nominating his own son, Mūsā, to succeed himself instead of al-Ma'mūn. Al-Amīn's action fueled the fire between the two brothers, which would turn out fatal for al-Amīn.

One of the effects that occurred because of the burning of the succession document was a polarization of the people in the empire. For example, Dawūd b. 'Isā

⁸¹ See Chenje, 43-5, 54, 110. See also, Jere L. Bacharach, "Al-Amin's Designated Successor: The Limitations of Numismatic Evidence," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, no. 1 (Jan.-Mar. 1996): 108-113.

⁸² To see two versions of the text see Chenje, 95-103.

b. Mūsā, the governor of Mecca, recognized al-Ma'mūn as the legitimate caliph because he viewed al-Amīn as having broken his sacred oath of succession.⁸³ It also fueled al-Ma'mūn's efforts to portray his fight against al-Amīn as a renewal of the original 'Abbāsīd revolution and as a fight against corrupt religion where al-Ma'mūn embodied the ideal pious leader and al-Amīn was viewed as impious and unfit.⁸⁴ The religious symbolism gained by this association and the propaganda used against al-Amīn (of which al-Amīn's burning of the succession document is an example) aided al-Ma'mūn in his efforts to convince his new supporters that they followed the correct path.

Al-Ma'mūn's New Supporters

Even with the polarization that occurred in the empire, al-Ma'mūn desperately needed support. The vast majority of the army and resources lay in the hands of al-Amīn, and al-Ma'mūn's plight was clearly desperate as he found himself in a position of opposition to the current caliph. The majority of his support came from the region of Khurāsān, which he had been appointed to as governor following the stipulations of the succession agreement. As with most major rebellions in Khurāsān, religion was a primary motivating factor and al-Ma'mūn capitalized on this by using heavily endowed religious symbols to motivate and gather supporters. Ibn Khaldūn wrote, "Religious propaganda gives a dynasty at its beginning another power in addition to that of the group feeling it possessed as the result of the number of its supporters."⁸⁵ Al-Ma'mūn used the power found in religion through many different symbols and ideas. For example, the original 'Abbāsīds, who mastered the art of religious

⁸³ Al-Tabarī, vol. 3, part 1: 860-864.

⁸⁴ See Sharon, *Black*, 22-23. Michael Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: the Heirs Of the Prophets In the Age of al-Ma'mūn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 28. See also the poem in Bacharach: 111.

⁸⁵ Ibn Khaldūn, 126.

propaganda, set themselves up as *mahdīs*, and al-Ma'mūn did so also.⁸⁶ In addition, the general feel of al-Ma'mūn's propaganda tried to show al-Amīn as impious and unfit to rule (assertions that he never seems to have overcome), whereas al-Ma'mūn was portrayed as pious and judicious.⁸⁷

Al-Ma'mūn's supporters mainly provided military help, then, after the war, attained important positions in the administration, but significantly, the supporters that he used to win his war against al-Amīn comprised very few of the original 'Abbāsīd supporters spoken of in the previous chapter. In a way, he paralleled the original 'Abbāsīd revolution by drawing his supporters from Khurāsān and the other Eastern provinces. However, unlike the original revolution, the nature of their service was different. Al-Ma'mūn had no other basis of support that he could draw on, and he certainly had no clandestine service operating for years which could finally thrust itself into the open. On the other hand, he did have kinship ties in the region on his mother's side, who was originally from the area.⁸⁸ Thus, the nature of the service his supporters gave him was different, perhaps more characterized by the common goal of throwing off unpopular 'Abbāsīd governors, of which Khurāsān had many, and kinship ties that al-Ma'mūn shared because his mother was born in the Eastern provinces. In other words, they might be better thought of as allies, or friends, rather than *mawālī*.⁸⁹ Al-Ma'mūn seemed to easily combine this mutual alliance with religious propaganda, creating a neo-*da'wa* for his movement, thus making his Khurāsānī supporters neo-*Abnā'*.⁹⁰ Another difference between the original 'Abbāsīd

⁸⁶ This will be further discussed later in chapter V.

⁸⁷ This statement is based on the evidence provided by el-Hibri, found mostly in accounts by various historians about the war after al-Ma'mūn had become the Caliph. See El-Hibri, "Reign," 54, 63-67.

⁸⁸ His mother was a non-Arab concubine (i.e. slave) of Harūn's. This may account for the reason why al-Amīn was chosen as Harūn's direct successor, even though many scholars of the time seem to agree that al-Ma'mūn was the better qualified candidate.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 169.

⁹⁰ It makes one wonder, with the parallels that can be shown to the original revolution and his movement if this was purposeful. It probably was, and therefore, the question also comes up that if he

revolution and al-Ma'mūn's succession was that relatively few people swore loyalty to him, but those who did were used as "power brokers" to control much larger forces, in some ways similar to the earlier *quwwād*, who had large retinues of private soldiers and other political support, in so much that they could influence political situations and issues by siding with a particular group or person.⁹¹ For instance, Humayd b. 'Abd al-Hamid al-Tusi, one of al-Ma'mūn's lieutenants, stated: "I owe al-Ma'mūn nothing, but I owe the Sahlids much."⁹² This seems to epitomize the structure of his new supporters, who would turn the tables on the Abnā' and hold the positions they had once enjoyed (and later military slaves would begin to turn the tables on them).

Immediately after al-Ma'mūn's victory over al-Amīn, the new Khurāsānīs quickly began replacing the Abnā' in positions of prominence and power in both the military and the administration.⁹³ In fact, it became so evident that people tried to disguise themselves as Khurāsānīs in order to enter into the *dīwan*.⁹⁴ As part of his placement of new supporters, al-Ma'mūn began using Khurāsānī elite in high administration positions. For example, the Tāhirid family was a prominent family during the war with al-Amīn. After the war, al-Ma'mūn gave Tāhir (the most prominent member of the family and general of one of al-Ma'mūn's armies) the responsibility for administering first Baghdād, then another province, and finally both Baghdād and Khurāsān.

The primary result of the insertion of the new Khurāsānīs was the disenfranchisement of the Abnā'. For instance, the office of *Sahib al-Shurta* had the

saw the power the Abnā' in Baghdad had gained, whether this was one of the reasons to begin using military slaves—to prevent so much power to slip into the hands of any one group, especially one whose loyalty was that of clients, whereas the bond between master and slave was considered much stronger.

⁹¹ Ibid., 177.

⁹² Al-Baghdādī trans. and quoted in Ibid., 177.

⁹³ During this beginning period, see the section in this chapter on "The Crisis of Legitimacy."

⁹⁴ Sharon, "Military," 137.

responsibility for policing the caliph's court and the capital, which office had normally been filled by Abnā' families up until the time of al-Ma'mūn's victory. Thus, individuals like al-Musayyab b. Zuhayr, of Abnā' background, lost their positions of power and influence.⁹⁵ Al-Ma'mūn's support for his elite Khurāsānī followers also seems to have been very important for him; on one occasion he stated:

[Social] rank is like genealogy. It binds people together so that it is more worthwhile for an Arab nobleman (*sharīf al-'arab*) to be in the company of a foreign nobleman (*sharīf al-'ajam*) than to be in that of a plebian Arab (*wadī' al-'arab*). And it is more worthwhile for a foreign nobleman to associate with an Arab nobleman than with a foreign plebian. For the honored among peoples represent a class much as those of low origins also represent a class (*ashrāfu'l-nās tabaqa kamā anna awdāyihim tabaqa*).⁹⁶

It is interesting to note that al-Ma'mūn sees a distinction between classes and not between ethnicities. It makes sense that al-Ma'mūn, who seemed to have no particular love for the common people, used the elite from the towns and regions of Khurāsān for his support.⁹⁷ In fact, the two main features that characterized al-Ma'mūn's socio-political power in Khurāsān consisted of the support of the Khurāsānī nobility and popular support mobilized by religious propaganda, but organized under the elite families.⁹⁸ Al-Ma'mūn's reliance on elite families was complete, and those families greatly benefited from his patronage of them. Though it seems that even with the increase of power in Baghdād, the elite families stayed tied to their various regions and largely retained their local identity. As a result of both his primary reliance on Khurāsānī elite families and their continued identity with their various regions, al-Ma'mūn relied on more than one family to help balance his newly acquired power. Thus, al-Ma'mūn distributed his authority to these new-found power

⁹⁵ El-Hibri, "Reign," 247.

⁹⁶ Ibn Hamdūn quoted in *Ibid.*, 153.

⁹⁷ See below on his concept of the caliphate where he believed the commoners being ignorant and dangerous.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

groups in an effort to maintain a balance of support among elite families. Some of the most important power groups are as follows:

Tāhirids

One of the most famous of the new power groups were the Tāhirids. Their rise to power came through Tāhir b. Husayn (159-207AH (776-822AD)), in many ways the originator and reason for their rise. Tāhir's chance at fame came when he was chosen by al-Fadl b. Sahl as a young Khurāsānī aristocrat to lead al-Ma'mūn's armies against those of al-Amīn at the beginning of the civil war.⁹⁹ His astonishing success led to leadership in the post-war administration, in part because of his useful connections in Baghdād.¹⁰⁰ Later, the province of Khurāsān would be added to the Tāhirids' regions of control, which they held for many years.¹⁰¹ Their support for the new 'Abbāsīd regime seems complete, particularly since they continued to send taxes and slaves even after they had essentially gained complete autonomy in the later years of the dynasty.

Sahlids

The Sahlid ascendance can be directly linked with al-Ma'mūn's primary advisor and vizier, al-Fadl b. Sahl and his brother Hasan b. Sahl. Throughout their tenure as advisors, major changes took place—most importantly the winning of the war versus al-Amīn. Al-Fadl is believed to have instigated many of the policies and methods that al-Ma'mūn used to gather support in Khurāsān, and especially once the war was won for the period between the end of the war and al-Ma'mūn's arrival in Baghdād. Al-Fadl mysteriously died on the return journey in 203AH (818AD);

⁹⁹ Hugh Kennedy, *The Court of the Caliphs: The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty* (London: The Orion Publishing Group Ltd., 2004), 91.

¹⁰⁰ Kennedy, *Prophet*, 153.

¹⁰¹ See Norman Douglas Nicol, "Early 'Abbāsīd Administration in the Central and Eastern Provinces, 132-218 A.H./750-833 A.D." (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1979).

however, his brother continued to play an important role, even marrying off one of his daughters to al-Ma'mūn.¹⁰²

Khūrāsānīyya

This is a large and somewhat general category of those who supported al-Ma'mūn, but an important one, even though many of the families delineated above also belonged to this group. It is important to remember that the Khūrāsānīyya power group consisted of more than just the above families. Many different Eastern princes joined al-Ma'mūn and supported him. As stated before, a large number of these primarily served in the army, where they formed the cavalry units of al-Ma'mūn. The Khurāsānī support was especially important in the beginning because of al-Ma'mūn's feelings toward 'Abbāsīd supporters in Baghdad. His repudiation of those not of his new Khūrāsānīyya power group is shown by barring anyone except Khurāsānīs to be registered in the *dīwan*. In a wonderful example, al-Tabarī writes of al-Ma'mūn's feelings toward Arabs, in particular the Syrian Arabs:

One man repeatedly appealed to Ma'mūn in Syria saying to him: O Amīr of the Faithful, look upon the men of Syria with the same eye with which thou lookest upon the Persians of Khurāsān. Said [Ma'mūn]: Thou hast asked too much, O brother of the sons of Syria. By God! [I can] not bring down a Qaysite from his horse without finding even a single dirham left in my treasury. As to the Yaman, lo by God! I have never loved them nor they me. As to Qudā'ah, the leaders of that tribe hope for the Sufyānī and his revolt and are waiting to join his supporters. As to the Rabī'ah, that tribe is angry [even] with God ever since He sent His Prophet from amidst the tribes of Mudar. There are not among the tribe of Rabī'ah two men who can appear without one of them being a Khārijite rebel. Let me be, and may God smite thee!¹⁰³

¹⁰² For an interesting look at the relationship between al-Fadl and al-Ma'mūn see el-Hibri, "Reign," 199-209.

¹⁰³ Abū Jāfar Muhammad Ibn Jarīr al-Tabarī, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*, ed. M.J. De Goeje (Lugd. Bat.: E.J. Brill, 1879-1901) vol. 3, part 1: 1142-1143.

وذكر عن محمد بن علي بن صالح السرخسي قال تعرض رجل للمأمون بالشام فقال له يا امير المؤمنين انظر لعرب الشام كما نظرت لعجم اهل خراسان فقال أكثر علي يا اخا اهل الشام والله ما انزلت قيسا عن ظهور الخيل الا وانا ارى انه لم يبق في بيت مالي درهم واحد واما اليمن فوالله ما احببتها ولا احببتي قط واما قضاعة فسادتها تنتظر السفيناتي وخروجه فتكون من اشياعه واما ربيعة فساخطة على الله مبيته من مضر ولم يخرج اثنان الا خرج احدهما شاريا اعزب فعل الله بك

English trans. and quoted from Sharon, "Military," 138.

Clearly, the Khūrāsānīyya were much better than the Arabs, according to al-Ma'mūn.

The Tāhirids, Sahlids, and the Khūrāsānīyya in general each played an important part in helping al-Ma'mūn to succeed in securing the caliphate and to relieve his crisis of support, but he did more than just ally himself with various families of Khurāsān. He did many things to engender their support, one of which was the reemphasis on Persian/Sassanian culture. El-Hibri gives one example when he states:

The new title 'God's Caliph' was an example of a double appeal to Muslim and non-Muslims. On the frontier, the caliph came in touch with Turkic and Iranian traditions of power, where the conception of divinely sanctioned monarchy was not only officially adopted but popularly accepted. The idea of a 'deputy' of God...had its Arabic linguistic and Islamic religious ambiguities, but these nuances probably lost their significance when the title was translated.¹⁰⁴

In addition to al-Ma'mūn's clear use of divinely sanctioned monarchy, he also began to use various court ceremonies and customs from Persian culture. For example, during al-Ma'mūn's reign the caliph was separated from his audience with a veil.¹⁰⁵ He also tied himself closer to the Khurāsānī elite a few years after entering Baghdād by being married to al-Hasan b. Sahl's daughter, Būrān.¹⁰⁶ This marriage showed several things. First, prior to al-Ma'mūn, no 'Abbāsids had been married to any clients, demonstrating that al-Ma'mūn took his clients seriously and sought to bind himself to them and to the region of Khurāsān through kinship.¹⁰⁷ Second, it also showed the luxury and richness of the court, adding a display of wealth and generosity to his followers.¹⁰⁸ In addition to al-Ma'mūn's marriage and adoption of Persian court practices, his patronage of other cultures was found in his establishment

¹⁰⁴ El-Hibri, "Reign," 129.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 130.

¹⁰⁶ M. Rekaya, "al-Ma'mun, Abū 'L-Abbas Abd Allāh b. Harun al-Rashid," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new version.

¹⁰⁷ El-Hibri, "Reign," 162.

¹⁰⁸ Ibn Khaldūn, 140.

First, he played-off of Baghdādī apprehensions to get their initial support. After al-Ma'mūn's victory against his brother, he continued to reside in Marw (Khurāsān), his capital city during the war. In essence, it seemed that he wished Marw to be the new capital of the empire. In many ways this was disastrous for Baghdād. During the war Baghdād had been pounded by siege machines, and the long siege drove business away creating great hardship for many of the inhabitants during and after the war.¹¹⁰ After the war things did not seem to improve because many in the city objected to al-Hasan b. Fadl being given the governorship of Baghdād and Iraq. As a result, revolts broke out, some of them serious.¹¹¹ In addition, al-Ma'mūn's nomination of an 'Alid ('Alī al-Rida) as his successor to the caliphate, aggravated tensions to the point of open revolt, resulting in Ibrāhīm b. Mahdī receiving the oaths of allegiance from many in Baghdād as a type of counter-caliph to al-Ma'mūn. All of these combined, including the loss of the court to Khurāsān, leading to a depression in Baghdād that al-Ma'mūn was able to capitalize upon. One of the ways he did this was to take a long time to journey back to Baghdād once the decision had been made. A full year passed from the time he left Marw in Khurāsān until he entered Baghdād and two especially important things happened along the way. First, al-Fadl b. Sahl was assassinated by members of al-Ma'mūn's caliphal guard.¹¹² Al-Fadl was viewed by many in the empire as the person who instigated many of al-Ma'mūn's actions and policies while he was in Marw.¹¹³ These included placing al-Hasan as governor of Baghdād and nominating 'Alī al-Rida as al-

¹¹⁰ A great portion of the city was destroyed during the war see al-Tabarī, vol. 3, part 1: 868-880.

¹¹¹ Major rebellions included those led by Muhammad b. Ibrāhīm in 199/815, Mansūr b. Mahdī 201/816, and Ibrāhīm b. Mahdī in 202/817. Muhammad b. Ibrāhīm (Ibn Tabataba) was an 'Alid who rebelled in Kufa, which will be expanded on later. Mansūr and Ibrāhīm b. Mahdī were the sons of a previous caliph who enjoyed the support of many 'Abbāsīd family members. For more information see Kennedy, *Early* 152-162.

¹¹² Dominique Sourdel, "al-Fadl b. Sahl b. Zadhānfarūkh," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new version.

¹¹³ Dominique Sourdel, *Le Vizirat 'Abbāside de 749 à 936 (132 à 324 de l'Hégire)*, vol. 1 (Damascus: Institut Française de Damas, 1959), 211.

Ma'mūn's successor. His assassination was fortunate for al-Ma'mūn because now al-Fadl, whom Baghdādī's saw as responsible for these missteps in al-Ma'mūn's policy, was dead – bringing new life to al-Ma'mūn's image. Second, the death of 'Alī al-Rida (from eating poisoned grapes) also occurred on the journey from Marw to Baghdād.¹¹⁴ Like al-Fadl's death, al-Rida's was also fortuitous because now the 'Alid successor to al-Ma'mūn was no longer a problem. With his death, many people in Baghdād withdrew their support from the counter-caliph, Ibrahīm b. Mahdī, who was forced into hiding. Thus, two of the greatest objections and apprehensions the Baghdādīs held against al-Ma'mūn turned to his favor. Al-Ma'mūn also made a great spectacle of his return to Baghdād, one writer demonstrating his joy of the moment by reflecting:

"I saw [the Caliph] al-Ma'mūn when he arrived from Khurāsān during the year two hundred and four [A.D. 819/20]. He had come from the Iron Gate on his way to the Palace of Rusāfa, the crowds being lined up as far as al-Musallā." He went on to say, "My father was carrying me on his arm, and when al-Ma'mūn passed by he raised me up on his arm, saying to me, 'This is al-Ma'mūn.' It was during the year four [A.H. 204: A.D. 819/20], but I have remembered it to this hour. At the time I was four years old."¹¹⁵

His joy is apparent, but al-Ma'mūn's monumental entrance into the city was no fluke. Before entering the city al-Ma'mūn's vizier, Ahmad Abī Khālīd told him that if a fight occurred they would not be in a good position to defend themselves and take the city, but al-Ma'mūn assured the vizier that all would go well.¹¹⁶ Either al-Ma'mūn was a reckless optimist or he had carefully calculated the effects that the events of his

¹¹⁴ Kennedy, *Early*, 161.

¹¹⁵ Abū al-'Abbās Ahmad ibn Yahyā Tha'lab quoted in Muhammad Ibn Ishaq al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist li-Ibn al-Nadīm*, vol. 1 (Cairo: al-'Arabī lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 1991), 126.

رايت المأمون لما قدم من خراسان وذلك في سنة أربع ومائتين ، وقد خرج من باب الحديد وهو يريد قصر الرحافة . والناس صفان الى المصلى . فكان أبى قد حملنى على يده فلما مر المأمون رفعنى على يده وقال لى : هذا المأمون . وهذه سنة أربع ، فحفظت ذلك عنه الى الساعة ، وكان سننى يؤمئذ أربع سنين .

English quotation and trans. Bayard Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, vol. 1 (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1970) 162-163.

¹¹⁶ El-Hibri, "Reign," 210.

year-long journey would have on the populace. The loss of the two most objectionable figures, al-Fadl b. Sahl and 'Alī al-Rida (from the Baghdādī point of view), the long anticipation of al-Ma'mūn's journey, and the monumental entrance he received upon arrival in Baghdād assured the initial compliance with Baghdādīs who were probably grateful to have the caliph and his court return. However, al-Ma'mūn did other things to engender their support and to try to heighten the legitimacy of his rule.

The second thing that al-Ma'mūn did to legitimize himself and his succession was to pull the now fractured empire back together. Beginning in 204AH (819AD) al-Ma'mūn started the process of recentralization of the empire. During the war various groups had taken advantage of turmoil to become essentially independent rulers. Ya'qubī quotes at least 26 towns and regions that had new rulers; most did not have the backing of the caliph al-Ma'mūn, and had used the civil war as an excuse to rebel against the current government (sometimes in al-Ma'mūn's name).¹¹⁷ Prior to al-Ma'mūn's return to Baghdād he was somewhat tolerant of those who had rebelled against the caliphate; however, once he returned to Baghdād he became totally intolerant of rebellions, as several groups would soon find out. One of these regional rebellions that exemplifies the others came from an area close to Baghdād, the Jazīra. Nasr b. Shabath became the tribal leader for a conglomeration of Arab tribes in the area. Nasr refused to swear loyalty to the new caliph and though he did not outright attack Baghdād, he was definitely in open rebellion by his refusal. Al-Ma'mūn seems to have decided to spread from his base in Baghdād in ever-widening circles as he sought to bring back the rebelling regions and towns once more under caliphal control, so Nasr and the Jazīra ended up as the first major rebellion on the list. Al-

¹¹⁷ Ya'qubī, *Tarīkh al-Ya'qubī*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1960), 445-446.

Ma'mūn sent 'Abdallāh b. Tāhir with his army to subdue Nasr and force his capitulation, but a stalemate ensued.¹¹⁸ Eventually, the stalemate was resolved and a compromise reached that brought Nasr under the control of the caliph, but it is important to note that the submission of Nasr was reached through diplomacy and not by force, suggesting that al-Ma'mūn may not have had the military resources to overcome Nasr, which established the need for a larger army.

In addition to subduing rebels, al-Ma'mūn also continued to expand the empire and bring more land under the central government's control. Two great examples of this are al-Ma'mūn's efforts in the East with the submission of Mazyar and Afshīn and their regions to Islam and the caliph.¹¹⁹ The continued expansion and influence in the East certainly helped to show al-Ma'mūn as a legitimate caliph because of his efforts to expand Islam in continual *jihād*. Al-Ma'mūn, the clever propagandist, held public celebrations following each victory over a rebel or submission of a new region to Islam, through which he widely displayed the victories he brought to Islam.¹²⁰

Another evidence of the success of al-Ma'mūn's centralization policies came from the coinage reforms he instituted in beginning in 206AH (821AD).¹²¹ The major reforms at the time included the reduction in the number of mints (and thereby controlling where they were located) and the elimination of names on coins. Up until this time names in particular were seen as a propaganda device, and historians today actively used coins to identify people and verify accounts found in the chronicles.

¹¹⁸ Some sources suggest that Nasr and 'Abdallāh b. Tāhir became friends during the stalemate and that Tāhir actually got in trouble for helping Nasr. See al-Tabarī, vol. 3, part 1: 1067-1083 for the letters between Nasr and al-Ma'mūn.

¹¹⁹ Mazyar and Afshīn were local leaders of smaller principalities who were converted by al-Ma'mūn to Islam, thereby forging a patron-client relationship with him. Afshīn became a senior leader under al-Mu'tasim and Mazyar later rebelled against al-Mu'tasim.

¹²⁰ El-Hibri, "Reign," 226.

¹²¹ See Ibid., 254.

Many different officials prior to al-Ma'mūn's reforms would often place their names on coins, thus giving their coins the backing of the office they held and officials would use coins as a legitimizing device proclaiming their authority. As a result, the placement of names on coins were important for many reasons. However, el-Hibri points out, and rightly so, that because al-Ma'mūn changed the style of the coins and eliminated the names from being stamped on the coins he effectively withheld the entire legitimizing benefit of minting coins for himself, so that any coin minted would essentially bear evidence only to his authority and not to someone else's.¹²² For the common people the two most familiar ways that leadership was recognized was through the Khutba on Friday and the minting of coins that they would use throughout their daily transactions—with these coinage reforms al-Ma'mūn now enjoyed a monopoly of the two most important symbols of legitimacy. To al-Ma'mūn's credit, the reforms were a success and that they were carried out in diverse parts of the empire is a testimony to the effect that his authority carried weight.

The third way that al-Ma'mūn sought to combat the crisis of legitimacy was through his use of religious symbolism. As seen in the previous section on al-Ma'mūn's new supporters, religious symbols played an important part in acquiring and motivating his helpers in Khurāsān. Al-Ma'mūn seemed to be a master of religious propaganda and he put his knowledge to work in combating his need for legitimacy in Baghdad also. The example of how he used popular traditions will show how religious symbols enhanced his legitimacy.

Popular tradition held that at the beginning of each century a pious leader would appear and revive religious participation. Al-Ma'mūn used this tradition, and the fact that the years just prior to 200AH (815AD) were extremely chaotic, to

¹²² See *Ibid.*, 254-259.

enhance his image and power. Many different forces contributed to the chaos found at the end of the eighth century, the largest by far being the civil war, but the rebellion in towns and regions, the economic downturn (likely caused by the war), and traditions of the end of the world and a coming *mahdī* each added to the commotion of the times.¹²³ Al-Ma'mūn encouraged the view that he was a restorer through his use of propaganda exalting his pious way of living.¹²⁴ Once al-Ma'mūn had attained the caliphate he found that others began using this same idea for their own purposes, most of whom were involved in Shī'ite rebellions. A partial result of others trying to use the idea of a "restorer" or "*mahdī*" was al-Ma'mūn's declaration that he was "*Khalīfat Allāh*," which he then placed on coins in certain regions. Previous caliphs had used the title, but none seemed to make the claim in the same sense as al-Ma'mūn.¹²⁵ Crone and Hinds have argued extensively on this subject and they see a clear link between his use of this title and his desire for an absolute *imāmate*.¹²⁶ Indeed, the title did have clear connotations of a new religiosity and increased religious authority. Al-Ma'mūn used the title in two ways: first, to help defend himself against other claims by messianic challengers and to increase his religious authority and legitimacy. Second, he would eventually use it to give himself a greater ability to manipulate religious scholarship and increase his authority to influence religious thought. In essence, al-Ma'mūn used popular tradition and the title to enhance his legitimacy. These two acts enhanced his legitimacy through an increased association with religion by playing-off of the popular belief that he was the "restorer

¹²³ For more information on the *mahdī* and see M. Madelung's article, "al-Mahdī," Encyclopedia of Islam, new version. This was actually one of the excuses that al-Ma'mūn used for the nomination of al-Rida—that al-Ma'mūn was the last caliph before the end of the world. See also Cooperson, 30-31; el-Hibri, "Reign," 92, 102.

¹²⁴ See below for further details on the propaganda he used to encourage this view.

¹²⁵ The one possible exception to this is 'Abd al-Malik, see el-Hibri, "Reign," 123-124.

¹²⁶ See Crone and Hinds, chapter 2.

of Islam" who had come at the beginning of the century and the belief that the end of the world was coming soon with the appearance of a *mahdī*.

In summary, both the crisis of support and the crisis of legitimacy greatly affected al-Ma'mūn's caliphate. The first was sparked by the beginning of the conflict between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn. Al-Ma'mūn desperately needed supporters and he turned to elite families in Khurāsān to fulfill this need. The second crisis came after al-Ma'mūn's victory over his brother. A military victory did not bring wide support and legitimacy in the eyes of the majority of the Islamic community. To combat this, al-Ma'mūn used many different methods, the three examples cited here showed that by playing off of Baghdādī apprehensions, recentralizing the government, and by using religious symbolism, he was able to enhance his legitimacy both among prior power groups and the popular classes.

V. THE IDEOLOGY, APPLICATION, AND RESULTS OF AL-MA'MŪN'S CONCEPT OF THE CALIPHATE

*By its very nature, royal authority claims all glory for itself... —Ibn Khaldūn*¹²⁷

Once al-Ma'mūn consolidated his support and strengthened his claim of legitimacy, he began to widely promulgate his concept of the caliphate. In general, al-Ma'mūn's concept of the caliphate saw a direct relationship between the weakening of the caliph and the weakening of the *umma*. As part of this concept, he viewed the caliph as a special link between God, the Prophet, and the Muslim *umma*. Nawas relates, "This unique bond bestows special authority and enjoins the fulfillment of duties which includes the guardianship of Islam and the leadership of the Community both secularly and spiritually."¹²⁸ Because of al-Ma'mūn's belief in the importance of the caliph and the special link and knowledge that the caliph received from God, he began a complex process which ended in a reformation of Islam to attain his ideals.

Al-Ma'mūn's reforms were undeniably complex, reflecting the complexities of the political situation of the time. Efforts of reform included economical (such as the coinage reforms spoken of earlier), social (such as the greater acceptance of non-Arabs in high positions both in the administration and army), and religious (such as the *mihna*). The best example of al-Ma'mūn's concept of the caliphate comes from his way of trying to implement religious reforms, namely, his introduction and prosecution of the *mihna*.

¹²⁷ Ibn Khaldūn. *Al-Muqaddima*, trans. by Franz Rosenthal (*The Muqaddima: An Introduction to History*) 3 Vols., ed. and abridged by N.J. Dawood. Bollingen Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969. Reprint, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 132.

¹²⁸ Nawas, "al-Ma'mūn," 55.

Al-Ma'mūn's *Mihna*

Many scholars have written about the *mihna* and given opinions on various aspects of it. The most common view is that al-Ma'mūn initiated it because he favored Mu'tazilite views, and that it was a culmination of tension between the caliph and the 'ulamā'.¹²⁹ In later years, his actions have become more clear. For instance, Hodgson viewed the *mihna* as an effort to create an ecclesiastical hierarchy loyal to al-Ma'mūn (interestingly this seems to draw on the idea of a Persian/Sassanian court).¹³⁰ El-Hibri sees the *mihna* as the last stage of al-Ma'mūn's religio-political program of absolutism, and Nawas has written extensively on the subject seeing the *mihna* as an effort to regain lost caliphal authority.¹³¹ Each of these are partially correct, the difference between the views are the authors' emphasis on the various aspects of the *mihna* and the documents associated with it.

One thing that can be said for certain is that the *mihna* was a test designed to bring the 'ulamā' in line with a policy set by al-Ma'mūn. In one sense, this means that al-Ma'mūn used it as a litmus test to see how the various individual 'ulamā' would react, and the position of the createdness of the Qur'ān seemed to be an astute and convenient means for al-Ma'mūn to use to test them for loyalty.¹³² In another sense, the *mihna* might also be thought of as a political move to repress the various opposition groups and to ferret out those of the 'ulamā' who had ties with these

¹²⁹ Hinds gives a good overview of the different opinions on the *mihna* and its purposes, reserving for himself the consequences of the *mihna* to the caliphate and the growth of Sunnism. M. Hinds, "Mihna," Encyclopaedia of Islam, new version.

¹³⁰ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1, *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1974; University of Chicago, 1977), 478.

¹³¹ See el-Hibri, "Reign," 300; Nawas, "al-Ma'mūn," 52. See also his other writings referenced below and in the bibliography.

¹³² Nawas, "al-Ma'mūn," 51.

groups.¹³³ Repression of opposition groups makes sense because of the apprehension al-Ma'mūn felt toward those who did not wholeheartedly agree with him and his reforms, and in particular with the 'ulamā' who supported them. 'Ulamā' ties to opposition groups hold particular importance because, as will be shown below, al-Ma'mūn believed the common people to be ignorant and easily misled—and it was his duty to lead them.

Al-Ma'mūn targeted the 'ulamā' because of their increasing power and prominence. Many trends emerged in the late eighth and early ninth century in religious thought. One trend was the growing importance of *hadīth*, and in particular the process of writing them down and studying them; this created a niche whereby some 'ulamā' built for themselves authority based on knowledge of the Prophet's sayings and actions—and al-Ma'mūn saw this as a threat and an opportunity to control the direction of Islam.¹³⁴ Another trend emphasized independent reasoning and interpretation. Al-Ma'mūn probably favored this method because of his affinity for Persian culture, Mu'tazilism, and his criticism of reliance on *hadīth* and *sunna*. However, these two trends did not necessarily contradict each other and were often intermingled. The divergence of the two came when al-Shāfi'ī (150-204AH (767-820AD)) wrote his *Risāla* between 199-204AH (815-820AD) which favored *hadīth* and analogy. This led to a further strengthening of individual scholars who specialized in *hadīth* transmission.

From this point forward religious authority came from knowledge of *hadīth* by individuals. As a result, the 'ulamā', who specialized in *hadīth*, grew in power and influence. When the testing came, it was individuals such as Ahmed Ibn Hanbal who

¹³³ Cooperson, 38.

¹³⁴ See Hinds, "Mihna," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new version, 5; John Nawas, "The Mihna of 218 A.H./833 A.D. Revisited: An Empirical Study," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, no. 4 (December, 1996): 705-706.

were tested, most likely because they had a certain level of influence or a history of opposition to the government. This propelled al-Ma'mūn to test them and assure himself of their acquiescence and loyalty. One might think that testing individuals instead of the entire group was odd, but early 'Abbāsīd life and scholarship was based on individuals and not necessarily groups.¹³⁵ 'Abbāsīd patronage of scholars was normally based on an individual basis and so was religious authority, because it was based on the knowledge of *hadīth* a single individual held. Any testing needed to be done on an individual basis. In part, this is why the effects of al-Ma'mūn's ideology on the '*ulamā*' are sometimes difficult to determine. They must be made on an individual basis and though some generalizations can be made, a true study must be taken on an individual basis, which the primary sources may not fully support. The loyalty of the '*ulamā*', and the support they gave the government must be considered lessened because of the *mihna*. Not only because of the direct attacks al-Ma'mūn made on '*ulamā*' authority, which were surely not well received, but also because of the influence the '*ulamā*' had over the common population, which perceived the attack on '*ulamā*' authority as a challenge to Islam and to them, as al-Mu'tasim realized after having Ibn Hanbal flogged.¹³⁶ Al-Ma'mūn hoped that by forcing the '*ulamā*' to publicly declare their support for the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'ān, their authority would be lessened because it showed them as an appendage of the caliph and the government, not as independent authorities.

The actual doctrine of the *mihna*, the createdness of the Qur'ān, was declared in 212AH (827AD), but al-Ma'mūn did not begin to enforce it until 218AH (833AD). The exact reasons why he waited for five years before actually enforcing it we might never know. El-Hibri suggests that the timing was because al-Ma'mūn was not in

¹³⁵ Roy P. Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society*, Princeton Studies on the Near East (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 85, 96.

¹³⁶ See Patton.

Baghdād and therefore would be “securely removed from the scene of the trials which were likely to stimulate disturbances against the court...”.¹³⁷ Additionally, the caliph had also subdued most rebellions by this time and the empire was relatively peaceful internally and he was on the Byzantine frontier fighting against the infidel Byzantines and carrying out *jihād*, as a caliph should do. Each of these reasons for the delay may have contributed to the postponed enforcement of the doctrine. Regardless of the reason of this delay the *mihna* doctrines represented a major shift in the caliph’s attitude towards religious authority.

The *mihna*, as declared by al-Ma’mūn, consisted of four primary documents. These documents are: *Risālāt al-Khamīs*, the letter designating al-Rida as the caliphal heir, the *mihna* letters, and his will.¹³⁸ These documents show seven distinct views held by al-Ma’mūn in conjunction with his view of the caliphate.¹³⁹ Each of these ideas can be plainly seen as reasserting the power of the caliph as the supreme political and religious leader.¹⁴⁰

First, the caliph is a representative of God and the Prophet. Al-Ma’mūn, in his letter to Ishaq b. Ibrāhīm states, “That which God has a right to expect from His representatives [or: Caliphs, *khulafā’*] on earth and from those entrusted by Him....”¹⁴¹ Clearly, al-Ma’mūn, as the caliph, views himself as the representative of God. In addition to this instance, he portrays the caliph as a representative of God at

¹³⁷ El-Hibri, “Reign,” 298.

¹³⁸ John Nawas, “A Reexamination of Three Current Explanations for al-Mamun’s Introduction of the Mihna,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, no. 4 (November, 1994): 620. For the three *mihna* letters as recorded by al-Tabarī see al-Tabarī, vol. 3, part 1: 1112-1121.

¹³⁹ Nawas, Reexamination: 620-1.

¹⁴⁰ The texts of these documents are also reproduced in Muḥamad Māhir Hamādah, *Al-Wathā’iq al-Siyāsīyyah wa’l-Idārīyyah al-‘Ā’ida li’l-‘Asr al-Abbāsī al-Āwwal*, vol. 2, (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1979).

¹⁴¹ Al-Tabarī, vol. 3, part 1: 1117,

أما بعد فإن من حق الله على خلفائه في أرضه وأمانته عبادته

English trans. by C.E. Bosworth, *The History of al-Tabari (Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa’l-mulūk)*, vol. 32, *The Reunification of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate*, Suny Series in Near Eastern Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987). These seven views have been adapted from Nawas’s which he gives in Nawas, al-Ma’mūn.

least two other times, in a letter to Hasan b. Sahl¹⁴² and in his letter designating ‘Alī al-Rida as his successor.¹⁴³ As stated before, the idea that the caliph had a special link with God and the Prophet was not new, Abū Yūsuf had declared it in his work; however, al-Ma’mūn believed this idea went much further than Abū Yūsuf.¹⁴⁴ For him, the caliph was *the* link with God, and it was through that link that direction would be given to the *umma*, as the following views demonstrate.

Second, the caliph has a unique relationship with God. In the same letter to Ishaq b. Ibrāhīm as above, al-Ma’mūn states that the caliph has an “excellence of learning which He [God] has entrusted to them and the knowledge which He has placed within them.”¹⁴⁵ The caliph is given special inspiration to guide the community, while the general population is seen as ignorant and needing direction.¹⁴⁶

Third, the caliphal institution was created by God. When the texts of these four documents are read, al-Ma’mūn’s belief that the caliphate was created by God becomes self-evident. For example, he states, “upon whom He has been pleased to lay the setting up of His religion and upon whom He has laid the burden of caring for His creatures, the putting into effect of His ordinance and His laws (*sunanihi*), and the conscious imitation of His justice among His creation....”¹⁴⁷ These statements, and others, show clearly that al-Ma’mūn believed God set up the caliphal institution to carry out his work, and therefore any interference by anyone was a violation of God’s commands.

¹⁴² Complete text in Nawas, Reexamination: 620.

¹⁴³ Complete text in Crone and Hinds, 135.

¹⁴⁴ See Abū Yūsuf, *Kitāb al-Kharāj* (Cairo: Dar al-‘Atsam, 1981). Also see Zaman, 109.

¹⁴⁵ Al-Tabarī, vol. 3, part 1 : 1117,

ويدلوا عليه تبارك اسمه وتعالى بفضل العلم الذي اودعهم والمعرفة التي جعلها فيهم

English trans. by C.E. Bosworth, *History*.

¹⁴⁶ Cooperson, 47.

¹⁴⁷ Al-Tabarī, vol. 3, part 1 : 1117,

الذين ارتضاهم لاقامة دينه وحملهم رعاية خلقه وامضاء حكمه وسننه والانتماء بعدله في بريته

English trans. by C.E. Bosworth, *History*.

Fourth, the caliph is a guardian of God's laws and religion. In the letter to Ishaq b. Ibrahīm, al-Ma'mūn puts forth that concept that he is the supreme judge of who should be allowed to teach doctrine and make rulings. He states that any who do not believe in the doctrine of the createdness of the *Qur'ān* he will not consider "them as suitable for an office of confidence like that of trusted depository, person in good legal standing, legal witness... Moreover, even if any of them is outwardly known for his equitable behavior and is recognized for his straightforwardness... nevertheless ...A man who is ignorant in the matter of his religion... is even more sunk in ignorance in regard to other things."¹⁴⁸ Thus, in al-Ma'mūn's role as guardian of correct knowledge, he also determines who is fit to pass on religious knowledge.¹⁴⁹ Following this thought, Nawas shows that those whom al-Ma'mūn chose to interrogate personally were the most influential teachers and *fuqahā'* of the time.¹⁵⁰ Those who passed this political/religious examination retained the capability to work for the government, teach and pray in mosques, and averted the persecution leveled at those who refused.¹⁵¹ Al-Ma'mūn, as a result of the *mihna*, now definitively decided who transmitted religious knowledge.

Fifth, al-Ma'mūn explains that the caliph is the great educator, for God has entrusted him to "guide back to Him the one who has turned aside from Him and bring back the one who has turned his back from His command."¹⁵² By using this

¹⁴⁸ Al-Tabarī, vol. 3, part 1: 1120,
وليس يرى أمير المؤمنين لمن قال بهذه المقالة حظاً في الدين ولا نصيباً من الإيمان ولا عدالة ولا شهادة ولا صدق في قول ولا حكاية ولا تولية لشيء من أمر الرعية وإن ظهر قصد بعضهم وغرف بالسنداد مسند فيهم فإن الفروع مردودة إلى أصولها ومحمولة في الحمد والذم عليها ومن كان جاهلاً بأمر دينه الذي أمره الله به من وحدانيته فهو بما سواه اعظم جهلاً وعن الرشيد في غيره أعمى وأضل سبيلاً

English trans. by C.E. Bosworth, *History*.

¹⁴⁹ El-Hibri, "Reign," 301.

¹⁵⁰ Nawas, *Mihna*: 698-708.

¹⁵¹ See Ahmad Ibn Hanbal for a high profile example of one who refused to acquiesce. A good source, though somewhat dated, is Walter M. Patton, *Ahmed Ibn Hanbal and the Mihna: A Biography of the Imām Including an Account of the Muhammedan Inquisition called the Mihna, 218-234 A. H.* (Leyden: E. J. Brill, 1897). El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*: 97.

¹⁵² Al-Tabarī, vol. 3, part 1: 1117,

imagery al-Ma'mūn proclaims that he has ultimate responsibility for teaching and guiding the Muslim community. It is here that al-Ma'mūn's primary responsibility to the common people comes into play. They were often viewed as ignorant; one anecdote related by Thumama b. Ashras in *Kitāb Baghdād*, tells al-Ma'mūn the story of a man selling medicines and Thumama's effort to intervene:

He was calling out: "Cures for albugo, cataracts, glaucoma, dimsightedness, and myopia!" Meanwhile one of his eyes was lusterless and the other had a poultice [?] on it. But the people had gathered around him and were surging forward asking him to prescribe for them. I dismounted, plunged into the crowd, and called out: "Hey you! You look as if you need your eyes treated more than anyone else does! You say this medicine cures complaints of the eye. Why don't you use it yourself?"

He said, "I've been here for ten years and I've never seen a bigger idiot than you."

"How's that?"

"Where do you think my eye problem started?"

"I don't know."

"In Egypt!"

The crowd converged on me, saying, "He's right! You're an idiot!" They looked as if they meant to harm me, so I said, "By God, I did not realize that his eye problem started in Egypt!" And it was only by this subterfuge that I escaped them. [So al-Ma'mūn laughed and said you pulled a prank on the common people. Thumama said that which I received from God was bad praise and it is a very ugly memory. Al-Ma'mūn said, 'yes.']*¹⁵³

This anecdote likely found an appreciative audience in al-Ma'mūn, for he felt the same way, at one point he comments that "the broad mass of commoners and subjects" are ignorant in relation to true religion.¹⁵⁴ Perhaps more importantly, and related to the fourth concept detailed above, is that he believed the 'ulamā' to have

ويعدوا اليه من زاغ عنه ويردوا من ادبر عن امره

English trans. by C.E. Bosworth, *History*.

¹⁵³ Ahmad Ibn Abī Tāhīr Tayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdād*, ed. H. Keller (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1908).
 والله يا امير المؤمنين قد مررت منذ ايام في شارع الخلد وانا اريد الدار فاذا انسان قد بسط كساءه والقي عليه ادوية وهو قايم ينادي عليها هذا الدواء لبياض العين والعشاء والغشاوة والظلمة وضعف البصر وان احدى عينيه لمطموسة وفي الاخرى موسى له والناس قد انتالوا عليه واجفلوا اليه يستوصفونه فنزلت عن دابتي ناحية ودخلت في عمار تلك الجماعة فقلت يا هذا ارى عينك احوج هذه الاعين الى العلاج وانت تصف هذا الدواء و تخبر انه شفاء لوجع العين فلم لا تستعمله فقال انا في هذا الموضع منذ عشر سنين ما مربى شيخ اجهل منك قال فقلت وكيف ذاك قال يا جاهل اين اشكت عينى قلت لا ادري قال بمصر قال فاقبلت على تلك الجماعة فقالوا صدق الرجل انت جاهل وهموا بي قال فقلت لا والله ما علمت ان عينه اشكت بمصر قال فما تخلصت منهم الا بهذه الحجة فضحك المأمون وقال ما القيت منك العامة قال الذى لقيت من الله من سوء الثناء وقبح الذكر اكثر قال اجل

English trans. and quoted in Cooperson, 47; English translation in brackets mine.

¹⁵⁴ El-Hibri, "Reign," 302.

taught false concepts to the people and turned them against him.¹⁵⁵ This concept in the *mihna* was an effort to guide the ignorant masses correctly and to halt the promulgation of false beliefs by the '*ulamā*'.

Sixth, the caliph's behavior should follow the path of the Prophet. Al-Ma'mūn's advice to his brother, al-Mu'tasim, as he lays dying demonstrates this point. In essence, al-Ma'mūn tells him to help the people, protect them—especially the weak against the powerful—to be just, and to treat them gently, in other words, follow the path of the Prophet.¹⁵⁶

Finally, it is the people's duty to obey the caliph. That this would be included in his concept of the caliphate is not surprising, logic necessarily dictates that if the above points are true then those who desire eternal rewards would follow him. The *mihna* in almost its entirety is an example of this idea. After each of the letters, and most especially the third *mihna* letter, al-Ma'mūn calls for obedience to his instructions and for acceptance of the doctrine.

In summary, each of these concepts defines the caliph as the ultimate possessor of correct guidance. In essence, because of the caliph's unique relationship with God, his special knowledge given to him by God, and his role as an educator, the caliph is given sole authority to interpret correct belief and to provide correct guidance.

In many ways, the ideas promulgated by al-Ma'mūn are comparable with what are normally considered Shī'ite ideas. For instance, Imāmī Shī'ites believe: the *imām* is called by God, that his authority is absolute because it comes from God—not from men, that he has a unique relationship with God, that he receives special guidance from God, that he is the only person able to lead believers on the correct path, and that

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 302.

¹⁵⁶ See al-Tabarī, vol. 3, part 1: 1137-1138.

the *imām* is the best person able to exercise *ijtihād*.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, Zaydī Shī'ites emphasize the aspect of the necessity for an *imām* to forcefully assert his right of the leadership of the community by fighting against illegitimate leadership.¹⁵⁸ Each of these ideas can be clearly seen in al-Ma'mūn's views, as detailed above. Though Shī'ite influence on al-Ma'mūn's thoughts seem clear, it is not unexpected. For example, al-Ma'mūn's mother came from the Eastern provinces, he lived in Khurāsān while fighting against al-Amīn, and his primary support groups during the civil war and during his reign largely originated in the Eastern provinces. As a result, he was likely influenced by ideas found in these areas. In addition, these same provinces were largely settled by those who empathized with the 'Alids.¹⁵⁹ Thus, it would actually be surprising if there was no relationship to Shī'ite ideas in al-Ma'mūn's ideology. This influence shows in diverse ways—from his ideas on the caliphate, his nomination of 'Alī al-Rida (who would become the eighth Imāmī Shī'ite *imām*), his views on 'Alī b. Abī Tālib, and his views on the oneness of the Hashemite family.¹⁶⁰ Though the origin of al-Ma'mūn's ideas is important and interesting, the most important issue is that each of the above concepts contributed to the distancing of prior power groups such as the 'Abnā', the '*ulamā*' who wanted to limit the caliph's authority, etc., and a gathering of power and influence to himself and away from opposing '*ulamā*', which in turn contributed to the need for a new power group in the form of military slaves.¹⁶¹

Al-Ma'mūn used the *mihna* in combination with a direct attack on the structure of the legal system. Though caliphs were always somewhat involved in the

¹⁵⁷ For more information see Watt, 160; W. Madelung, "Imāma," Encyclopaedia of Islam, new version; S.H. Nasr, "Ithnā'ashariyya," Encyclopaedia of Islam, new version.

¹⁵⁸ Madelung, Imāma.

¹⁵⁹ For more detail see Sharon, *Black*.

¹⁶⁰ Sourdel also discusses the tie between Zaydī Shī'ites and the Mu'tazilites, and Shī'ites and al-Fadl b. Sahl, these may also have influenced al-Ma'mūn in addition to the other influences spoken about here. See Sourdel, *Politique*: 47-48; Sourdel, *Vizirat*, 1: 208; 'Alī al-Rida's letter of nomination.

¹⁶¹ See the section on the '*ulamā*' in the next chapter for discussion of this topic.

judicial process, al-Ma'mūn took a greater interest and inserted himself directly into the process. In part, he did this through his declaration that only those who would attest to the createdness of the Qur'ān were qualified as judges, but he also took steps outside the interrogations of the *mihna*.

The best examples of his interventions into the judiciary come from instances when he directly challenged *qādīs* and their rulings. The first example involves a prominent Abnā' member, 'Abdallāh b. Malik al-Khuza'i. An incident occurred where he had cursed someone's mother and that person wanted justice. After producing the evidence and the witnesses to prove it, the judge refused to punish 'Abdallāh because he did not like the witnesses. Al-Ma'mūn ordered the judge to punish 'Abdallāh, but again the judge refused so al-Ma'mūn had 'Abdallāh punished and the judge replaced.¹⁶² The second example of al-Ma'mūn's direct control of the judiciary comes from a *qādī* in Basra who had ruled on a case. Al-Ma'mūn studied the ruling and announced that it was faulty. After calling together other judges, he asked them if they had noticed the faultiness of the ruling, upon receiving a negative answer al-Ma'mūn proceeded to interrogate the judge and show them the error of his ways.¹⁶³ Third, an incident occurred involving the same Basran judge who had issued the previous faulty ruling. The judge refused to accept one of the two witnesses sent by a *qādī* (judge) friend of al-Ma'mūn's for a trial that he was officiating over. After al-Ma'mūn inquired why, the Basran judge proclaimed that he wouldn't accept the al-Ma'mūn's *qādī* friend as a witness, let alone those recommended by him. Al-Ma'mūn immediately dismissed the Basran judge and placed his office under the jurisdiction of his friend.¹⁶⁴ Each of these shows an inordinate amount of activity in the daily affairs of the judicial system. Where most other caliphs seem to have not

¹⁶² Jahshiyārī quoted in El-Hibri, "Reign," 323-324.

¹⁶³ Ya'qubī quoted in Ibid., 325-327.

¹⁶⁴ Wakī quoted Ibid., 328.

interfered with the judicial system as a whole, al-Ma'mūn seems to have inserted himself directly into the foundations of the system. He accomplished his ideological desires for more judicial control during the *mihna* by declaring himself the supreme judge and, therefore, he qualified as the judge of both small and large matters brought before the judiciary, enabling him to reinforce his authority.

In summary, al-Ma'mūn's *mihna* contains the best example demonstrating his concept of the caliphate. He mainly sought to gather power for himself by declaring the caliph as a deputy of God with special knowledge from Him. Because of this knowledge, the Caliph al-Ma'mūn was the only one who had the knowledge to guide the community. His active incursions into the judicial structure show a practical example of how al-Ma'mūn used his ideas to control an important part of the government with wide influence.

Al-Ma'mūn's War with Byzantium

The *mihna* was not the only way that al-Ma'mūn displayed his concept of the caliphate and the policies he endorsed. He also took other actions, his war with Byzantium being one of the best examples, which had many different purposes. His war with Byzantium influenced his prestige throughout most of Islam because it was viewed as *jihād* against a traditional enemy. In many ways al-Ma'mūn continued the pattern set by his father Hārūn al-Rashīd of constant *jihād* against the infidel Byzantines. This effort at being a "ghazī" caliph helped to show himself as a righteous and pious caliph, perhaps also reinforcing his authority to carry out *jihād* as the *Khalīfat Allāh*.¹⁶⁵ However, unlike his father, al-Ma'mūn sought to do more than raid the Byzantine border, he set up a systematic plan for conquering territory. On his successive campaigns he held fortifications, built new ones, and settled Muslims in

¹⁶⁵ See Bonner, 104-105. El-Hibri, "Reign," 280, 293.

the conquered areas. Al-Ma'mūn's campaigns were not for raiding and tribute, but for conquest and the extension of Muslim lands, equating him with the earlier righteous caliphs who fought to expand the borders of Islamic influence. In pursuing this goal he probably hoped to acquire the prestige of a ghazī caliph and a more favorable public attitude. His policies of the *mihna* in Baghdad were not well received. As hinted at earlier, one reason why he waited to enforce his createdness decree might have been so that he was out of the city and popular demonstrations against the *mihna* clearly showed the unpopularity of it.¹⁶⁶ By pursuing his righteous desires of *jihād* in the midst of the *mihna* uproar, he may have hoped that it would improve his image and curry some favor with the general population and the 'ulamā', while at the same time promulgating an additional facet of his ideology.

In general, al-Ma'mūn's ideology rested with his desire for a pious absolute *imāmate*. As seen through the *mihna* and the various concepts he revealed through the documents relating to it, he desired to control the 'ulamā' and religious knowledge. In essence, the attitude that he revealed through the *mihna* showed that unlike previous caliphs he had developed a concise ideology of what the caliph should do, how he should act, and that the people must strictly adhere to the caliph's dictates.

Other Effects of al-Ma'mūn's Ideology

The 'ulamā' were not the only group affected by al-Ma'mūn's policies and ideology. The results of al-Ma'mūn's reforms on mawālī are difficult to determine because of the diversity of this large group; however, for many, their roles likely changed very little. For instance, their responsibilities as tax collectors for the government changed somewhat because of the tax reforms that al-Ma'mūn introduced

¹⁶⁶ Ira M. Lapidus, "The Separation of State and Religion in the Development of Early Islamic Society," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 6, no. 4 (October, 1975): 380.

later in his reign, but no evidence indicates anything other than a nominal change in their position. However, their support of the caliph came in the form of gathering resources and not from political or military aid. As a result, al-Ma'mūn was forced to rely on his Khurāsānī supporters for help in politics and the military. The influence of the Abnā', once part of the powerful military and administrative body of the 'Abbāsīd empire, was drastically reduced. Both militarily and administratively, as has been shown, they regained little influence during the caliphate of al-Ma'mūn.

The impact that al-Ma'mūn's concept of the caliphate had on the kuttāb is important because it shows a lessening of political influence that occurred because of his policies. The best example of this loss was in the high government offices, such as the vizier. Prior to al-Ma'mūn's return to Baghdād, al-Fadl b. Sahl held the office of vizier. In this office he seems to have wielded an extraordinary amount of influence, both in gathering support for al-Ma'mūn from the Eastern elite families and in determining policy. However, after al-Ma'mūn returned to Baghdād, and al-Fadl's death, the vizier's role was one of supporting al-Ma'mūn and as an agent who enacted his ideology. For instance, some blame the nomination of al-Rida on al-Fadl's direct influence (showing the great power that they believed the vizier al-Fadl had on al-Ma'mūn), but when al-Ma'mūn decided to enforce the createdness doctrine, and to do so by way of the *mihna*—he sent the letters to his vizier in Baghdād and had him carry out his wishes. Al-Fadl was the instigator of policy, while al-Ma'mūn's later vizier only implemented his wishes.¹⁶⁷ Thus, the office went from one of both influencing and fulfilling policy to one of enforcing it.

The Shī'ite position during al-Ma'mūn's reign is very interesting, important, and complex. While 'Alid/Shī'ite rebellions seem to have been a constant source of

¹⁶⁷ Sourdel sees a similar depreciation of the power of viziers in al-Ma'mūn's reign after al-Fadl, see Sourdel, *Vizirat*, 1: 211-214.

concern in the early 'Abbāsid period, they were often fragmented with no single leader.¹⁶⁸ In contrast to 'Alid rebellions, al-Ma'mūn nominated 'Alī b. Mūsā (al-Rida), an 'Alid, as heir to the caliphate. The nomination of al-Rida had important results on al-Ma'mūn's support network.

It is hard to tell why he nominated an 'Alid as successor, but it greatly inflamed the tensions in Baghdād. One of the reasons may have been the influence of the Barmakids, who had educated al-Ma'mūn and had close relations with Sahlids (who sympathized with the 'Alids).¹⁶⁹ Another reason may have been the need for support and legitimacy at a time when both were still tenuous.¹⁷⁰ Maybe he did it as a result of animosity between himself and the 'Abbāsid family.¹⁷¹ Yet another reason for al-Rida's nomination might have been because he believed he was the last caliph before the end of the world.¹⁷² Mas'udi states that al-Ma'mūn nominated al-Rida to repay a favor done to him.¹⁷³ Finally, the nomination letter states the basis as al-Ma'mūn having special authority and 'Alī as being the most qualified of the *ahl al-bayt*. Any and all of these reasons have certain plausible points, and it was probably a combination of all of the above reasons. Al-Ma'mūn needed any support that he could get, especially in the still resistant southern Iraq at the time. In addition, Khurāsān and the Eastern provinces favored 'Alid causes, and thus his new supporters would be influenced by this effort to include 'Alids in the government and to fulfill a decades-old promise of the 'Abbāsids. This is particularly obvious when taken with evidence from a commemorative coin that was issued at the time of the nomination,

¹⁶⁸ Watt, 159-160.

¹⁶⁹ Kennedy, *Prophet*, 152.

¹⁷⁰ Sharon, *Black*, 31.

¹⁷¹ Cooperson, 29-30.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 30-31.

¹⁷³ Al-Sūlī quoted in Cooperson, 51.

but only minted in Marw, Samarqand, Herāt, and Isfahān.¹⁷⁴ Significantly, this coin carried the inscription, "From among the things ordered by the prince al-Rida, successor to the Muslims, 'Alī b. Mūsā b. 'Alī b. Abī Tālib" on the one side and al-Ma'mūn's important title of "Khaliphāt Allāh" on the other, clearly showing a link between himself, his claim to religious authority, and the 'Alids.¹⁷⁵ Though the effects of al-Rida's nomination on those in Baghdād seem to have been partially negated by al-Rida's death and al-Ma'mūn's later return to Baghdād, al-Rida's nomination shows plainly that al-Ma'mūn did not mind doing the unusual if it coincided with his vision of the caliphate and if it carried potential benefits. In the end, al-Rida's nomination seems to have had little affect on Shī'ites, but affected al-Ma'mūn's support in Baghdād negatively while helping to buoy his support among his new power groups from the East. In summary, 'Alid influence grew during al-Ma'mūn's caliphate because of his favor towards them and he clearly tried to acquire much more support from them; however, this did not seem to affect the vast majority of the splintered Shī'ites—rebellions continued to occur, with little evidence of increased support.

The Syrian Arab tribes continued to constitute an important group during al-Ma'mūn's reign. He sent out instructions for them to be mobilized in his Byzantine campaigns, but there is still a feeling that al-Ma'mūn never trusted them. In addition to al-Ma'mūn's normal dislike of the Arabs, al-Amīn's experience during the war also shows the relationship between the 'Abbāsids and the Syrians when he tried to call them up in defense of himself and his government. As part of al-Amīn's plea for help he sent 'Abd al-Malik to the Arabs (whom he had just appointed as governor to Syria for this purpose), and at his call came, "chief after chief and group after group, and

¹⁷⁴ El-Hibri, "Reign," 140.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 140.

whoever entered his audience received gifts and robes."¹⁷⁶ As the Arabs gathered, an incident occurred between the Abnā' and the Arabs. It provoked a war between the two groups with the Arabs leaving because of repeated defeats at the hands of the Abnā'.¹⁷⁷ In addition, al-Tabarī related that during the same time period a group of Arabs and Abnā' gathered at Hulwan to fight Tāhir, one of al-Ma'mūn's generals, but they began fighting each other because Tāhir sent spies rumoring that al-Amīn was giving extra pay to those staying with him in Baghdād.¹⁷⁸ In view of these incidents we can understand al-Ma'mūn's mistrust of the Syrians. In addition to his feelings of hatred towards them, the mutual dislike between the Abnā' and the Syrian Arabs (which probably also existed between al-Ma'mūn's new support groups), and their recent rebellion under Nasr b. Shabīb must have all combined to show al-Ma'mūn that they were not to be trusted. The result of al-Ma'mūn's policies left them clearly out of favor and certainly out of the greatest influential circles.

The 'ayyārān were a group that was actually part of the old Sassanian aristocracy and fighting forces, as shown above. 'Ayyārān influence probably increased, or at least stayed the same, but their status is impossible to determine with certainty. In fact, their most prominent mention comes in records of the account of the siege of Baghdād, otherwise they are rarely mentioned; however, at the time of al-Ma'mūn, and especially during the civil war, they came to represent an important power group. After the war was over, and al-Amīn slain, no evidence points to their support of al-Ma'mūn or their opposition to him.

¹⁷⁶ Abū Jāfar Muhammad b. Jarīr al-Tabarī, *The History of al-Tabarī (Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa 'l-mulūk)*, vol. 31, *The War between Brothers*, trans. Michael Fishbein, Suny Series in Near Eastern Studies. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), 104-108.

¹⁷⁷ See Ayalon, "Military," 14 and al-Tabarī, vol. 3, part 1: 843-845, for a more complete explanation of this conflict and its beginnings.

¹⁷⁸ Al-Tabarī, vol. 3, part 1: 830.

Finally, the Mu'tazilites was another of these power groups. This group seems to have blossomed under the reign of al-Ma'mūn. As noted previously, some of al-Ma'mūn's most trusted advisors were Mu'tazilites. For instance, Abū Hudhayl al-'Allāf, Thumāma b. Ashras, and Ahmad b. Abī Du'ād are all pointed out as having been close advisors and friends—all of them were Mu'tazilites.¹⁷⁹ Al-Ma'mūn also enjoyed a rational approach to many things and he constantly stretched out to grasp important ideas from surrounding cultures. Thus, his *Bayt al-Hikma* fits well into this process. Al-Ma'mūn clearly bestowed a wealth of patronage on Mu'tazilites, but his concept of the caliphate and his policies should not necessarily be seen as Mu'tazilite. Though Mu'tazilites definitely became more influential under al-Ma'mūn, they did not seem to have more influence than the new support groups that brought him into power.

In summary, the civil war between al-Ma'mūn and al-Amīn altered the role of these power groups by minimizing their influence and power. The outcome of the civil war brought new power groups into the political picture. In essence these new power groups were neo-Abnā' who were the elite families from Khurāsān that had vaulted al-Ma'mūn into power. The new groups took over many of the functions of the original 'Abbāsīd power groups. Positions in the military and bureaucracy throughout the empire were given up to these new supporters. The final blow to traditional supporters came from the promulgation of al-Ma'mūn's concept of the caliphate. In al-Ma'mūn's view, he reinforced the office of caliph and therefore strengthened Islam. Thus, the original 'Abbāsīd power groups largely wilted under the intense power radiated by al-Ma'mūn. In the end, the original power groups gave

¹⁷⁹ Nawas, "al-Ma'mūn," 28.

way to the new power groups, leaving al-Ma'mūn totally dependent on his Eastern supporters.

VI. THE ADOPTION OF MILITARY SLAVES

The use of slaves in the army is a subject which has attracted the attention of historians since the time of the Prophet. The use of slaves in the army is a subject which has attracted the attention of historians since the time of the Prophet.

Accounts of slaves in warfare stretch back to the days of the Prophet, and probably even further.¹²¹ More often slaves took part in battle alongside their masters. However, a difference exists between slaves who fought with their masters and slaves who were employed for the purpose of fighting. Additionally, there is a difference between those slaves who might have been purchased for a private military service or employed as domestic servants or as laborers in the government for use in government work. Military slaves are a group apart from these others. They were captured or purchased for the purpose of being employed in the army for the government under the leadership of the government.¹²² For al-Ma'mūn, the use of military slaves became a political necessity. The demand of al-Ma'mūn had taught him what reliance on the support group could mean, especially in military matters. To this in the past he had relied on one group or another. al-Ma'mūn systematized the employment of military slaves. He acquired military slaves himself, but a large portion of his efforts were devoted to encouraging his brother, al-Mu'tasim, to acquire them.

¹²¹ Ibn Khaldūn, 146-147.

¹²² The purpose of this chapter is to show the role of slaves in the army of al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'tasim. For an excellent study of the role of slaves in the army of al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'tasim, see the work of the late Professor J. A. S. G. Reade, *The Role of Slaves in the Army of al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'tasim* (London, 1968).

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VI. THE ADOPTION OF MILITARY SLAVES

...his own people become, in fact, his enemies. In order to prevent them from seizing power...the ruler needs other friends, not of his own kin, whom he can use against (them) and who will be his friends in their place. –Ibn Khaldūn¹⁸⁰

Accounts of slaves in warfare stretch back to the days of the Prophet, and probably even further.¹⁸¹ Most often slaves involved in battles fought alongside their masters. However, a difference exists between slaves who fight with their masters and slaves who are imported on a large scale for the express purpose of fighting. Additionally, there is a difference between those slaves who might have been purchased for a private military retinue or bodyguard and those purchased as slaves by leaders in the government for use in government wars. Military slaves are a group apart from these others; they were captured or purchased for the express intent of supporting and fighting for the government under the leaders of that government.¹⁸² For al-Ma'mūn, the use of military slaves became a political necessity, the demise of al-Amīn had taught him what reliance on one support group could mean, especially in military matters. To thwart the peril that reliance on one group could bring, al-Ma'mūn systematized the introduction military slaves. He acquired military slaves himself, but a large portion of his efforts were devoted to encourage his brother, al-Mu'tasim, to acquire them.

¹⁸⁰ Ibn Khaldūn, 146-147.

¹⁸¹ The purpose of this chapter is not to discuss the basic issue of slavery, but of a particular kind of slave—military slaves. For an introduction to slavery see Appendix A, and other authors such as Azumah, Forand, Hunwick, Phillips, Pipes, Willis, and Ze'evi in the bibliography. See also, Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990; 1992).

¹⁸² Pipes does a fairly good job at discussing the types of slaves and the difference between military slaves and other types of slaves in his book. See Pipes, *Slave*, 5-23.

Military Slave Numbers During al-Ma'mūn's Reign

Before a full explanation of al-Ma'mūn's reasons for introducing military slaves can be shown, we must understand the reasons behind their acquisition and the numbers of slaves actually purchased. The first military slaves seen in the 'Abbāsīd period appeared under the reign of al-Mansūr. During his reign al-'Azdī wrote that 4,000 Zanj slaves, under the command of a general, served in the army of the governor of Mawsil.¹⁸³ Nothing else is said about their function, or actions, but this seems to have set a precedent. Current research has not shown how common these units were prior to al-Ma'mūn, as such the incident appears to be a solitary event and not the beginning of the institution; however, this changes with al-Ma'mūn.

Al-Ma'mūn

The presence of military slaves in al-Ma'mūn's time can be deceptively hidden, but there are clear signs that during his reign a system of acquisition was in place, and well used. In general, al-Ma'mūn's dealings with military slaves, who were mostly Turks, increased in the second half of his reign.¹⁸⁴ After 212-213AH (827-828AD) there is a noticeable rise in the number of Turkish slaves in the military.¹⁸⁵ The year 212AH (819AD) should also be remembered as the year that al-Ma'mūn declared the createdness of the Qur'ān. Perhaps it is a coincidence that the same year al-Ma'mūn began to promulgate his ideology he also noticeably increased

¹⁸³ Muhammad 'Abdul Jabbar Beg, "The 'Serfs' of Islamic Society Under the 'Abbāsīd Regime," *Islamic Culture* 49, no. 2 (April, 1975): 113.

¹⁸⁴ Many different ethnic groups made up slaves during this time, something that expanded to include even more ethnicities in later periods. However, primary sources, such as Jāhiz, point mainly to Turks as the major ethnic group in the early period. In addition, most modern authors who have touched on military slavery during this period agree that Turks (i.e. those from outside the Eastern provinces) formed the vast majority of military slaves; for more information see Crone, Pipes, Forand, and Gordon.

¹⁸⁵ El-Hibri, "Reign," 264.

his use of military slaves. This increased importation of military slaves suggests that he was deliberately taking the next step in his program of strengthening the caliphate.

Al-Ma'mūn acquired slaves in many different fashions. Balawī reported that the Samanids in 200AH (815-816AD) sent Turkish slaves as part of the taxes owed to al-Ma'mūn, along with horses.¹⁸⁶ Further, Ibn Khurdādhbih stated that 'Abd Allāh b. Tāhir sent 2,000 war captives of the Turkish Ghūzz tribe as part of the taxes owed for the years 211-212 (826-827AD).¹⁸⁷ These slaves were brought into the central region of the empire because of taxes. However, just because slaves were sent as payment of taxes does not necessarily mean that these slaves were military slaves. For example, Nubia sent slaves into the central part of the empire for a very long period of time, lasting until at least the empire of the Fatimids in Cairo.¹⁸⁸ There is little indication that Nubian slaves played a large role in military slavery during the early 'Abbāsīd period in Baghdad; however, we find that the slaves coming from the outside the Eastern provinces as part of taxes or other means did involve those who would become a part of the military slavery system.

Three examples demonstrate how slaves brought in as part of a tax payment or as war captives became involved in military slavery. First, Balawī is recorded as sending Tūlūn (the father of Ahmad Ibn Tūlūn who would later take control of Egypt and who was trained as a military slave in Samarra) as part of a tax payment.¹⁸⁹ Second, during al-Ma'mūn's reign some of al-Mu'tasim's first military slave purchases were made in Baghdad, including Ashinās, Itākh, Wasīf and probably

¹⁸⁶ Forand, *Development*, 18.

¹⁸⁷ Forand, *Development*, 18.

¹⁸⁸ See the chapter on the Bakt in François Renault, *La Traite des Noirs au Proche-Orient Médiéval VIIe - XIVe siècles* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, S.A., 1989).

¹⁸⁹ Forand, "Development," 18; Zaky M. Hassan, "Ahmed b. Tūlūn," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new version.

Bughā the Elder—not through his agents in Khurāsān.¹⁹⁰ Because these purchases did not take place in the Eastern provinces they must have arrived either through the normal slave trade or as part of the taxes sent to Baghdad from the Eastern provinces. Lastly, after al-Ma'mūn's death, al-Mu'tasim ascended the throne. During his reign an agricultural slave rebellion in the southern marshes of Iraq became particularly serious. In order to contend with the unique terrain that Turks on horseback were ill-equipped to deal with, al-Mu'tasim brought in war captives from Egypt. The account states, "he sent for the Egyptians whom he had brought back as captives, and who were accustomed (to fighting) in the water, for they could dive like fish."¹⁹¹ In this instance al-Mu'tasim used war captives as military slaves. Though this instance comes after the reign of al-Ma'mūn has ended, it provides a good example of how war captives were employed to fulfill a particular need. Each of these examples combine to show that slaves brought into central Islamic lands through taxes, booty, or other means could still easily become military slaves.

Taxes were not the only way that al-Ma'mūn acquired slaves. Nuwayrī states that "[al-Ma'mūn] was the first who acquired Turks for military service and paid a high price for them, he purchased each of them for 100,000 or 200,000 dirhams."¹⁹² This is particularly important because it shows that al-Ma'mūn was directly involved in purchasing Turkish slaves. For the price to increase to a very high state one of three things must have been happening: al-Ma'mūn purchased enough Turks to drive

¹⁹⁰ Kennedy, *Armies*, 121. Gordon, 23.

¹⁹¹ Bar Hebraeus trans. and quoted in Forand, "Development," 20. We know that al-Mu'tasim brought back slaves to Baghdad on at least one occasion after putting down an Egyptian revolt, see Gamāl al-Dīn Abū al-Mahāsān Yūsuf Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *Al-Nugūm al-Zāhira fī Mulūk Misr wa'l-Qāhira*, vol. 3 (Cairo: al-Mu'assasah al-Misriyah al-'Ammah lil-Ta'lif wa'l-Tarjamh wa'l-Tibā'ah wa'l-Nashr, 1963-1971), 209.

¹⁹² Nuwayrī (8th century AH (14th century AD)) quoted by de Goeje in Ahmad b. Abī Ya'qubī Al-Ya'qubī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, ed., M.J. de Goeje, *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum* (Luguni, Batavorum: E.J. Brill, 1892), 255.

وهو اول من اتخذ الاتراك للخدمة وتغالى في اثمانهم فكان يشتري الواحد منهم بمائة الف ومائتى الف درهم .

English translation mine.

the price higher because of demand, the price increased because it was the caliph who was purchasing the slaves (i.e. slave dealers increased the purchase price of the slaves because of a belief that the caliph could afford higher prices), or a combination of both. Mostly likely it was a combination of both in some form; however, this does not detract from the fact that the number of Turkish slaves purchased increased the price, leading to the conclusion that al-Ma'mūn significantly augmented the number of Turkish slaves purchased.

Once al-Ma'mūn gained this body of Turkish slaves what did he do with them? Information directly linked to al-Ma'mūn is rare. However, Jāhiz records:

On one of al-Ma'mūn's campaigns, I saw two lines of cavalrymen formed on both sides of the road near the campground. The line on the right was composed of one hundred Turkish horsemen, the line on the left of one hundred 'others'.¹⁹³

Jāhiz relays this information to praise the hardiness of the Turks, but fails to mention if they are slaves or attached to al-Ma'mūn in some other way. However, Turks are often mentioned in a slave context, particularly during this period. As a result, there is a definite possibility that they are part of a military slave unit. Thus, we find a build-up of slaves either through taxes, purchase, or other means and then Jāhiz's quote showing that Turkish troops are being used on one of al-Ma'mūn's campaigns against Byzantium. The above examples demonstrate how al-Ma'mūn began the systematic acquisition of slaves for military use. Most of the evidence for the build-up of military slaves under al-Ma'mūn is linked to al-Mu'tasim, one of his main supporters in the later years of his reign.

¹⁹³ Jāhiz quoted in Gordon, 16.

Al-Mu'tasim, al-Ma'mūn's brother and successor, was deeply involved in the processes of acquiring slaves. From the above examples, it is clear that al-Ma'mūn was involved in importing military slaves, both through taxes and purchase; however, al-Ma'mūn's main thrust for their acquisition came in encouraging and allowing al-Mu'tasim to acquire these slaves in very direct and obvious ways. The best evidence for al-Ma'mūn's encouragement of al-Mu'tasim's slave build-up comes from two sources. First, Ibn Qutayba stated, "Al-Ma'mūn ordered his brother Abū Ishāq [al-Mu'tasim] to acquire Turks, so he recruited them."¹⁹⁴ Second, al-Maqqdisī related, "Al-Ma'mūn ordered Abū Ishāq [al-Mu'tasim] to acquire the Turks for service and he used to buy each of them for a hundred or two hundred thousand."¹⁹⁵ Clearly, al-Ma'mūn was the instigator of al-Mu'tasim's acquisition of military slaves. Ya'qubī established that a large build-up of al-Mu'tasim's slaves occurred during al-Ma'mūn's reign when he wrote the words of one of al-Mu'tasim's agents saying:

Ja'far al-Khushshakī related this to me: 'Mu'tasim used to send me, in the days of Ma'mūn, to Nūh b. Asad in Samarqand to buy Turkish slaves, and each year I would bring him a certain number of them. As early as the time of Ma'mūn about 3,000 of these slaves had been gathered. When Mu'tasim became caliph, he intensified his search for them: he [even] bought up slaves from the population of Baghdād.'¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Ibn Qutayba, *Al-Ma'ārif* l'ibn Qutayba, ed. Dr. Tharwat 'Ukāsha (Egypt: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1969), 391.

وأمر أخاه أبا إسحق باتخاذ الأتراك وجلبهم

English trans. and quoted in el-Hibri, "Reign," 262.

¹⁹⁵ Mutahhar Ibn Tāhir al-Maqqdisī, *Kitāb al-Bad'i wa-l-Ta'rīkh*, vol. 6 (Paris, Ernst Larue, 1908), 112. وأمر أبو إسحق باتخاذ الأتراك للخدمة وكان يشتري الواحد منهم بمائة ألف ومائتي ألف

English quotation and trans. in el-Hibri, "Reign," 262.

¹⁹⁶ Ahmad ibn Abī Ya'qub al-Ya'qubī, *Kitāb al-Buldān* (al-Najaf: al-Matba'ah al-Haydarīyah, 1957), 22.

أعلمني جعفر الخشكي : كان المعتصم يوجه بي في أيام المأمون الى سمر قند الى نوح بن أسد في شراء الاتراك ، فكنت أقدم عليه في كل سنة منهم بجماعة ، فاجتمع له في أيام المأمون منهم زهاء ثلاثة آلاف غلام . فلما أفضت اليه الخلافة أحا قي طلبهم واشترى من كان ببغداد من رقيق الناس .

English trans. and quoted in Forand, "Development," 17.

Though no specific date is given by Ya'qūbī, the slave trader's testimony shows that al-Mu'tasim imported at least 3,000 Turkish slaves during the time of al-Ma'mūn. Additional testimony is given by Mas'ūdī who states: "Mu'tasim had a predilection for collecting Turkish [slaves] and buying them through the agency of his mawālī."¹⁹⁷ The evidence that at least some of these slaves were bound for military slavery comes from the Ibn Taghrī Birdī who stated that al-Mu'tasim used 4,000 Turkish troops on a campaign to Egypt in 214AH (829-830AD).¹⁹⁸ It appears that al-Mu'tasim dutifully continued to add to his unit of military slaves. There can be no doubt that al-Ma'mūn allowed and encouraged al-Mu'tasim to begin acquiring military slaves, especially since up until after al-Ma'mūn returned to Baghdād in 204AH (819AD), he and al-Mu'tasim were estranged and al-Mu'tasim had actually supported the counter-caliph, Ibrāhīm b. Mahdī. So, within ten years of al-Ma'mūn's triumphal entry into Baghdad al-Mu'tasim would have to regain favor with al-Ma'mūn and then begin acquiring slaves. Though perhaps somewhat speculative, the only way that al-Mu'tasim could have gained slaves in such numbers would have been with the blessing and encouragement of his brother, who generally distrusted the 'Abbāsīd family, and had reason to distrust al-Mu'tasim because of his earlier opposition.

All in all, al-Mu'tasim's number of 4,000 slaves fits well with similar units of the time.¹⁹⁹ Following Kennedy's discussion of military numbers in the 'Abbāsīd period, many units sent out to garrison various towns and regions of the empire were

¹⁹⁷ Mas'ūdī, 7: 118.

كان المعتصم يحب جمع الاتراك وشراءهم من أيدي مواليه

English trans. and quoted from Forand, "Development," 17.

¹⁹⁸ Ibn Taghrī Birdī, 208.

فخرج المعتصم من بغداد في أربعة آلاف من أتراكه وسافر حتى قدم مصر في أيام يسيرة

Also mentioned by al-Tabarī, vol. 3, part 1: 1101. Later, after he became caliph, he used Egyptian war captives to fight the Zutt rebellion (205-220AH (820-835AD)) in southern Iraq, making one wonder whether the war captives he used at that point in time were acquired during this campaign and became a part of his military slaves.

¹⁹⁹ Here I use 4,000 (Ibn Taghrībirdī's figure), but Ya'qūbī's figure of 3,000 could work almost as well.

around 4,000 men.²⁰⁰ However, larger groups would have been used for campaigns and would have been generally included in the *dīwān* registers. Kennedy, who has done the best research on the number of soldiers during the 'Abbāsīd period, shows that 100,000 soldiers may have received salaries during the reign of al-Mansūr, with a total of 250,000-300,000 potential soldiers on the *dīwān* lists. Though 4,000 seems rather small in comparison with the regular troop guesstimate at 100,000; however, it is important to remember that most of these troops were spread around the entire empire garrisoning various outposts and towns, with larger concentrations in the 40,000-50,000 range. If, for instance, al-Mu'tasim's campaign to pacify Egypt consisted of 40,000 troops then his unit of 4,000 military slaves constituted a ratio of ten free soldiers to every military slave, easily providing military slaves with a large enough number to be used as the primary officers and backbone of the army.²⁰¹

The Reasons for the Introduction of Military Slaves

Some authors writing on military slavery attribute their introduction to political motivations, for instance Pipes and Crone. Their arguments have centered on the "withdrawal of Muslims" from the government. However, there is no evidence to support these conclusions when combined with the introduction of military slavery. If, for example, Pipe's argument that Muslims withdrew from government because of a failure of the caliphate, a unified *umma*, and jihad, then the government would have either been entirely staffed by non-Muslims, or it would have collapsed under the weight of unrealistic expectations, leaving the empire open to invasion. The opposite of Pipe's claims occurred. Al-Ma'mūn largely reunified the 'Abbāsīd empire, he extended the borders—both in the East and the West—and he stabilized the

²⁰⁰ See Kennedy's description of numbers in 'Abbāsīd armies of the period in Kennedy, *Armies*, 96-99.

²⁰¹ For a look at various possible numbers in the early 'Abbāsīd army see, Kennedy, *Armies*, 96-99.

legitimacy of the caliphate. In contrast to Pipes' conclusions, the reason why al-Ma'mun introduced military slaves comes under four primary categories, they were: outsiders to the political spectrum, a counter balance to the new power groups, they filled a void left vacant by new power groups, and their loyalty was only to the caliph.

First, the military slaves were outside the current political spectrum prior to their arrival in Baghdād. In some ways the introduction of military slaves was the opposite of Abū Muslim's entrance into Khurāsān. He was an outsider to the political turmoil in the province and because of that he was able to eventually overcome most of the objections facing him, the most important of which was to gain widespread support in all groups, at all levels of society.²⁰² Military slaves, prior to their purchase and training, were a large group of people with no particular military alliance with those at court. As a result, their loyalty went to their master, the caliph, who could use them to support his ideology and policies and who in turn gave them everything they had. The most important part of this scheme for al-Ma'mun was that they were not attached to any power group, neither the older pre-civil war power groups nor the post-civil war groups who had risen to power with him.²⁰³

Second, military slaves provided a counter-balance to his other supporters. Al-Ma'mūn's ideology called for absolute power for himself, the caliph, but with the largely one-sided support coming from the new power groups he was vulnerable to the control or influence of the Khurāsānī elite who brought him into power and continued to be his most loyal supporters. For example, the Tāhirids became a very influential family following the civil war and especially after al-Fadl's death. At one point they governed Baghdād and Khurāsān at the same time. In addition to this, they likely held important positions in the administration and they were definitely

²⁰² See Sharon, *Black*, 223.

²⁰³ See Mottehedah, 178.

important in the military structure of the time. As a result, al-Ma'mūn greatly relied on them for his personal safety and the implementation of his policies. It is to their credit that save for once, when Tāhir refused to go on campaign, they seem to have been very loyal to him.²⁰⁴ However, the great reliance on them must have weighed heavily on al-Ma'mūn. As one who had only relatively recently been the subject of a power struggle with his brother and escaped from al-Fadl's influence, he was surely nervous of being dominated by an ally—no matter how loyal. Military slaves had the potential to lessen his reliance on the Tāhirids, provided the needed balance of power and separate column of support.

Third, after the civil war, gaps in power occurred that needed to be filled. With pre-civil war power groups weakened, or eliminated, the new power groups had to fulfill many of the roles needed to make the government work, especially in the areas of bureaucracy and the military. The bureaucracy did not seem to have many problems, probably because many non-Arab mawālī already held positions in it and were able to be easily replaced or to change alliances. The military had a harder job, especially with the many rebellious towns and regions. For instance, Nasr b. Shabath's rebellion did not end with a military victory, but had to be done through diplomacy because of a lack of manpower. This, combined with Tāhir's refusal to fight Bābak and the Khurramiyya in Azerbaijan must have alarmed the caliph: not only was his army not large enough, but because of Tāhir's refusal to fight, a large portion of his military power was degraded.²⁰⁵ Military slaves augmented al-Ma'mūn's loyal military power, giving him more troops who had a greater willingness to do what was asked.

²⁰⁴ There were also reports that Tāhir left out the caliph's name in the Friday Khutba after his return to Khurāsān to govern it (which was normally seen as an act of rebellion), but that was near the end of his life and no rebellion is known to have taken place. As a result, the authenticity of the report must be questioned.

²⁰⁵ See el-Hibri, "Reign," 273-274.

Fourth, the loyalty given by military slaves to their masters was different than that of allies or clients. The loyalty of the Turks was a direct and unconditional loyalty, while the loyalty of the Khurāsānīs was indirect and more of an alliance where each side benefited from association. Military slaves in particular were bound not only by *walā'*, but also by *istinā'*, that is to say military slaves enjoyed more than the patronage and clientage that a *walā'* relationship might bring. They also enjoyed the more intimate relationship of near adoption called *istinā'*.²⁰⁶ In this type of relationship the caliph would provide training, education, and discipline for the type of work they would be doing in the military or perhaps the administration.

Mottahedeh notes that:

"*Istinā'* is a surprisingly formal and serious relationship; a man expected from his protégé not an easy gratitude and affection, but a lifelong commitment of sizable dimensions. To say 'he is my *sanī'ah*' meant 'he is the person I have reared, educated, and trained well,' and the obligation to such a patron was like the obligation to a parent."²⁰⁷

The bond between a slave and his master, especially military slaves who clearly enjoyed the benefits of education, training, and patronage, were quite strong. Military slaves owed personal loyalty to their masters and in turn were treated as part of the family and as adopted sons.²⁰⁸ This fact is shown when Jāhiz writes the words of Turkish freedmen saying, "[our service to the caliph] is the service of sons to fathers."²⁰⁹

This loyalty comes in part from the fact that military slaves held an alien status in central Islamic lands. Their importation from Eastern regions left them without family or support group. Thus, al-Ma'mun could train, educate, and encourage a

²⁰⁶ Paul G. Forand, "The Relation of the Slave and the Client to the Master or Patron in Medieval Islam," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 2, no. 1 (January, 1971): 60.

²⁰⁷ Mottahedeh, 83.

²⁰⁸ Dror Ze'evi, "My Slave, My Son, My Lord: Slavery, Family and State in the Islamic Middle East," in *Slave Elites in the Middle East and Africa: A Comparative Study*, ed. by Miura Toru and John Edward Philips (London: Kegan Paul International, 2000).

²⁰⁹ Jāhiz quoted in Forand, *Relation*: 61.

relationship of closeness, engendering a spirit of loyalty and familiarity that he could use as a stable base from which to implement his ideology; then use it as a counter-balance against the important (and potent) help and influence of the Khurāsānīs.

The relationship between military slaves was also different in yet another way—the position of the caliph at the time of recruitment. When al-Ma'mūn and al-Faḍl recruited the new power groups al-Ma'mūn was in a position of weakness.²¹⁰ Al-Amīn had the strength and resources of most of the provinces behind him, as well as seasoned troops and commanders, while al-Ma'mūn on the other hand had few supporters and was under great pressure to build his support quickly. As a result, his relationship with his supporters was one of confederacy rather than one of total submission. Al-Ma'mūn needed support, and the Khurāsānīs sought to reject unwanted governmental policies. Military slaves were recruited on the opposite basis, al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'tasim recruited them from a position of power and strength. It was this position that enabled them to acquire the military slaves, leaving little doubt about the subservient nature of the relationship between the caliph and themselves—a stark contrast to his relationship with the Khurāsānīs.

The loyalty of the military slaves led to positions of power for them also, widening the possibilities for them which were not limited to military service. For example, from al-Tabarī we learn that Ashinas, one of the military slaves acquired early, commanded an army (both a military and an administrative post) that was sent to capture a city in 215AH (830-831AD) by al-Ma'mūn, which he did. In addition, after al-Mu'tasim's death Ashinas and Itākh, another military slave, helped in the transition of al-Wathīq's succession, demonstrating that by this point military slaves possessed a degree of political influence. Thus, in many ways military slaves

²¹⁰ See el-Hibri, "Reign," 277.

acquired an opportunity for social mobility that free men might not have available to them. For a free person, the ability to move up in rank, wealth, and influence was small. In order to do so one must either become part of the *'ulamā'*, the bureaucracy, the army, or perhaps a merchant. Even by becoming a part of one of these groups, with their limited opportunity for social mobility, did not provide the same prospects that military slaves enjoyed. In great part, this came from the close relationship that military slaves held with the head of the government, the caliph. Through this relationship they could acquire great wealth and power and sometimes, more importantly, influence with the caliph. As a result, military slaves enjoyed increased opportunities, which could overshadowed the opportunities of free men.

Other potential Factors in Their Adoption

The four factors described above are the primary reasons for al-Ma'mūn's commencement of adopting military slaves; however, other factors existed that also lent themselves to the sagacity of the act, the primary additional factor being their martial skills.

The Mode of Early 'Abbāsīd Warfare

Early 'Abbāsīd armies relied both on infantry and cavalry. A major evolution took place around the time of the 'Abbāsīd revolution. During this period cavalry forces became more emphasized than infantry. In fact, the Khurāsānīs (including the Abnā') were heavy horse-archers, who would also fight with spear and sword.²¹¹ The most important forces used against the Umayyads were heavily armored cavalry, but cavalry were also trained in infantry warfare and would dismount to fight defensive

²¹¹ David Nicolle, *The Armies of Islam 7th-11th Centuries*, Men-at-Arms Series, ed. Martin Windrow, no. 125 (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1982), 14. Though Nicolle does not mention the origin of this mode of fighting, given the ancestry of the Khurāsānīs one must believe that it was a remnant of the Sassanian mode.

battles. As a result, one of the new practices brought by the revolution was a reliance on cavalry, but in some ways, infantry was still the basic unit because when the army was hard-pressed they would dismount and fight as infantry. Thus, cavalry was emphasized, but infantry was still the basic mode of warfare.²¹² At some point the 'Abbāsids began emphasizing the strategy of using their cavalry that infantry would often be mounted behind the cavalry.²¹³ When jumping ahead to the time of al-Ma'mūn we see that cavalry is even more emphasized than before. Tāhir's army during the civil war was mostly made up of cavalry forces (further influencing the opinion that the original 'Abbāsīd Khurāsānī supporters were mainly cavalry) with a smaller infantry contingent. Al-Amīn's army was composed of more infantry than cavalry, though much larger in numbers. Tāhir handily beat the army sent against him by al-Amīn, marking yet another turning point in the favor of cavalry in smaller groups with a de-emphasized role of infantry soldiers.²¹⁴

One of the most interesting sources of 'Abbāsīd warfare comes from the Byzantine *Tactica* commissioned by emperor Leo VI (reigned c. 272-299AH (886–912AD)).²¹⁵ It describes the 'Abbāsīds as favoring speed and mobility, noting that their infantry were mounted. 'Abbāsīd cavalry were armed with bows and arrows, two-edged swords, lances, shields, and axes; the armor they used was comprised of breastplates, helmets, arm-pieces, greaves and generally compared to the weapons and armor of "Romans."²¹⁶ Also, with the introduction of military slaves, their "whole hope of victory is based on arrows," showing the Turkish reliance on horse-archery.²¹⁷ It notes the importance of formations (essentially that they never broke formation),

²¹² Ibid., 12-14.

²¹³ Reuben Levy, *The Social Structure of Islam: Being the Second Edition of The Sociology of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 429.

²¹⁴ Kennedy, *Armies*, 109.

²¹⁵ See Levy, 435-6 for a more extensive discussion.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 436.

²¹⁷ *Tactica* quoted in Ibid., 436.

but if a formation was split that it could be easily be put back together. In general, they would defend themselves against attack until the enemy looked tired and then launch their own attacks, saying "they are bold when hopeful of victory, but easily frightened if they are in despair of it."²¹⁸ The general impression from the *Tactica* is that the Islamic armies by this time have very much adapted to the Persian/Byzantine style of fighting. It is especially interesting that the arms and armor used by them was identified as Byzantine by the writers of the *Tactica*, showing the intermixing of fighting styles. However, the arms and armor of the 'Abbāsīd armies was not the only thing that had progressed since the seventh century. By at least the 'Abbāsīd period (and probably long before) they had learned the uses of many different types of siege engines and seemed to use them well against various fortifications. The Byzantines were reminded of this as al-Ma'mūn sought to add to territory under Islamic control, refusing to stop even for the rich bribe or tribute offered by the Byzantine emperor. In summary, the *Tactica* and other sources note that the preferred method of warfare during al-Ma'mūn's reign was an emphasis on cavalry and maneuverability, supported by infantry. Because of this strategy, Turks in the form of military slaves fit very well, as Jāhiz shows through his essays.

The Merits of the Turks

Jāhiz is noted for his essays on the strength, skill, and cunning of the Turks. As a close associate of al-Mu'tasim and al-Ma'mun, such a thing seems natural, and it is from him that we receive much of our information on why Turks were so prized. Jāhiz points out three important aspects of Turkish military skill: their prowess as mounted archers, their stamina, and their natural aptitude for war.

²¹⁸ *Tactica* quoted in *Ibid.*, 436.

First, Jahiz extols their brilliance as mounted archers in his essay comparing the virtues of Turks versus other types of warriors, he states:

Neither the Kharijites nor the Bedouins are famous for their prowess as mounted bowmen. But the Turk will hit from his saddle an animal, a bird, a target, a man, a couching animal, a marker post or a bird of prey stooping on its quarry. His horse may be exhausted from being galloped and reigned in, wheeled to right and left, and mounted and dismounted, but he himself goes on shooting, loosing ten arrows before the Kharijite has let fly one.

The Turk has two pairs of eyes, one at the front and the other at the back of his head.

The Turk...aims his arrow as accurately behind him as he does in front of him. Especially formidable is his trick of using his lasso to throw a horse and unseat its rider, all at a full gallop.²¹⁹

According to Jāhiz the Turk seems to combine many of the important characteristics that make a horse-archer potent. One of the important keys in this passage is that Turks were excellent horsemen. The benefit of having superb horsemen in the army is rather obvious, but more especially important if, as the *Tactica* points out, your tactics are based on mobility. The other key in Jāhiz's writing is that of their excellence in horse-archery. In part, this follows the argument that mobility in 'Abbāsid tactics was at a premium. Hopefully, by showering your opponent with arrows you could do more damage to him before he reached you, more especially if you were able to move forward or backward and continue to fire your arrows—keeping yourself entirely out of the range of pike-men on foot and other heavy cavalry.

Stamina was the second attribute that Jāhiz praised about Turks. Jāhiz provides two passages that demonstrate the stamina of the Turks:

...As for their ability to stand trotting, sustained galloping, long night rides and cross-country journeys, it is truly extraordinary. The Turk...is more experienced than a professional farrier, and better than a trainer at getting what he wants from his pony.

²¹⁹ Jāhiz. *The Life and Works of Jahiz: Translations of Selected Texts*, trans. Charles Pellat, trans. from French by D.M. Hawke. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 93.

As regards ability to stand trotting, if the stamina of the border fighters, the posthorse outriders, the Kharijites and the eunuchs were all combined in one man, they would not equal a Turk.

When the Turk travels with horsemen of other races, he covers twenty miles to their ten, [he] never travels like the rest of the band, and never rides straight ahead. On a long, hard ride, when it is noon and the halting-place is still afar off, all are silent, oppressed with fatigue and overwhelmed with weariness. Their misery leaves no room for conversation. Everything round them crackles in the intense heat, or perhaps is frozen hard. As the journey drags on, even the toughest and most resolute begin to wish that the ground would open under their feet. At the sight of a mirage or a marker post on a ridge they are transported with joy, supposing it to be the halting-place. When at last they reach it, the horsemen all drop from the saddle and stagger about like bandy-legged like children who have been given an enema, groaning like sick men, yawning to refresh themselves and stretching luxuriously to overcome their stiffness. But your Turk, though he has covered twice the distance and dislocated his shoulders with shooting, has only to catch sight of a gazelle or an onager near the halting-place, or put up a fox or a hare, and he is off again at a gallop as though he had only just mounted. It might have been someone else who had done that long ride and endured all that weariness.²²⁰

The second example, which is much shorter, is the second part to a quotation already used:

I tell you that I witnessed from them [that is, the Turks] something wonderful and strange. On one of al-Ma'mūn's campaigns, I saw two lines of cavalrymen formed on both sides of the road near the campground... They were standing formation awaiting the arrival of al-Ma'mūn. It had reached mid-day, and the heat was intense. When [al-Ma'mūn] finally arrived, all of the Turks with the exception of three or four, were astride their mounts, whereas the mixed group of others, with the exception of three or four, were sprawled across the ground.²²¹

Both examples are important. In the first example, extensive in its praise, shows Turkish endurance, by long rides and reinforces the concept of the Turk as an unsurpassed horseman. The second contributes to the view that Turks had unusual stamina, but is particularly important because it is placed during al-Ma'mūn's reign. Both demonstrate the stamina of the Turk not only in riding, shooting, scouting, in both hot and cold, but also show him in control of his horse, an important part of any cavalryman's skills. Indirectly Jāhiz also attributes part of the success of Turks to

²²⁰ Ibid., 93-95.

²²¹ Jāhiz quoted in Gordon, 16.

their mounts. The normal horses used by those in the steppe region are smaller horses and are not particularly known for their stamina.²²² Jāhiz does not mention the origins of the horses the Turks rode at the time, but Arabian horses are much more known for their stamina than those of their steppe cousins, leaving one to wonder whether they used steppe horses (and always took an extra supply of horses with them) or had learned to ride the larger, more durable, horses of the Arabs.

Lastly, Jāhiz promotes the Turks' natural aptitude for war. Jāhiz writes that all people have aptitudes for different things, Turks have a special aptitude for war, stating:

Peoples of varying habits of thought, different opinions and dissimilar characters cannot attain perfection unless they fulfill the conditions needed to carry on an activity, and have a natural aptitude for it. Good examples are the Chinese in craftsmanship, the Greeks in philosophy and literature, the Arabs in fields that we mean to deal with in their proper place, Sāsānians in imperial administration, and the Turks in the art of war. They care only for raiding, hunting, horsemanship, skirmishing with rival chieftains, taking booty and invading other countries. Their efforts are all directed towards these activities, and they devote all their energies to these occupations.²²³

Jāhiz's praise for the Turks comes because he sees their interests and skills as basic, and nomadic. Ibn Khaldūn would partially agree with him, for he believed that Bedouins were naturally more courageous because they had not been corrupted by luxury, and chiefly rely on themselves for their defense and their lives.²²⁴ Both views, though somewhat different, are correct, each shows that one of the most attractive characteristics of Turks, or nomads in general, was their self-sufficiency and their propensity for war and raiding which could easily be formed into "civilized" warfare.

²²² See Bonnie L. Hendricks, *International Encyclopedia of Horse Breeds*, forward by Anthony A. Dent (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995) 286-287, 37-43; See also, Reuven Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk-Ilkhanid War, 1260-1281* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 215.

²²³ Jāhiz, 96-97.

²²⁴ Ibn Khaldūn, 94-95.

These three characteristics provide the final factor that al-Ma'mūn may have used in determining to import them as slave soldiers. Each is an attractive characteristic to have in an army, making it so that al-Ma'mūn could have better soldiers to rely on both in war and in peace. Yet, even with these martial characteristics how much more did the Turks have to offer Islamic civilization which had survived for more than two hundred years without them?

How Much Better Were The Turks?

Turks brought with them many skills, but these skills could not have been the sole reason for importing and adopting military slaves. For example, Turkish horsemanship is cited as a primary reason for their importation by Jāhiz, but Persians and Arabs also had cavalry. They had a long tradition of cavalry tactics and warfare, particularly the Persians who had often faced the Byzantine phalanx. Research has still not shown if, or how, Turks were superior in horsemanship, or if this characteristic was hyperbolized by Jāhiz and others to help explain al-Mu'tasim's reliance on them. Current research actually shows that the mobility of Turkish horse-archers was more limited than Arabs, the one redeeming value was their archery skills—their ability to shoot accurately moving both forwards and backwards.²²⁵

The importance of Turkish archery might also be overstated. According to current knowledge, the Khurāsānīyya, who helped al-Ma'mūn come into power, and the Turks were both primarily horse-archers, though they could also fight with the lance, sword, etc., but in many situations that al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'tasim would find themselves, horse-archers were not the best troops for these conditions. For instance, during the civil war al-Ma'mūn's armies laid siege to Baghdād and historical sources record that much of the fighting was waged within the confines of streets. Horse-

²²⁵ Nicolle, 30-31.

archers were not well suited for this type of fighting. Cavalry is much more comfortable and efficient in wide-open spaces. The skills necessary for effective combat in confined spaces are different, perhaps this could explain why the fighting went on for so long and that the 'ayyārūn, who were an infantry unit, were able to hold on for so long against the armies that had decimated all previous opponents in the field.²²⁶

After the civil war al-Ma'mūn came upon at least two situations which did not use horse-archers to their fullest potential. First, as al-Ma'mūn sought to reunify Islamic lands, Bābak and his Khurramiyya rebelled in the mountainous areas of Azerbaijan. The mountains do not provide horse-archers, who prefer fighting at long-range, with the space they need to function well, rather than close fighting or hand-to-hand combat. Al-Ma'mūn lost many men as he tried to quell this rebellion and Tāhir, his main military commander, refused to fight them. Bābak was not captured until al-Mu'tasim sent an army under Afshīn (who was originally from a mountainous region and knew how to fight Bābak in the mountainous terrain).²²⁷ The last example comes from later in al-Ma'mūn's reign as he campaigned in Byzantine territory. He never came upon any serious opposition and spent most of his time laying siege against various fortifications, capturing them, and then using them for his own armies. Once again, the utility of horse-archers who thrive on speed, mobility, and long-range fighting had to be less adept at fighting during sieges, where infantry and siege engines were most effective.

In addition to the above questions on their usefulness to al-Ma'mūn's military prowess, we also know little of the circumstances of their acquisition. For instance,

²²⁶ As described in a previous chapter, the 'ayyārūn were a Sassanian infantry remnant and who specialized in close-quarters fighting. See *Ibid.*, 30-31 and Zakeri.

²²⁷ See al-Tabarī, vol. 33. (In the translated edition)

later military slaves were purchased when they were young. Ayalon shows this in part when he translates this passage saying:

If a man [of the Kimak] begats a son, he would bring him up and provide for him and take care of him until he attains puberty. Then [i.e. on attaining puberty] he would hand him a bow and arrows and would drive him out of his abode telling him: 'fend for yourself!', and he would treat him [thenceforward] as a stranger and foreigner. There are amongst them [amongst the Kimak] those who sell their sons and daughters in order to cover their expenses.²²⁸

The context of the quotation is one of Turks being sold into slavery as military slaves. The youth of military slaves became an important point to many military slavery systems of later eras. Their youthfulness allowed military slavery systems the opportunity to convert, educate, and train these young boys in order to transition them into their new life with the skills they needed and with a bond of loyalty in place. If the majority of slaves were purchased as young boys during al-Ma'mūn's time then the training that they received would have been mostly from their Arab and Persian trainers, begging the question of how many of their legendary skills were the result of training with Abbasid task masters and how many were the result of their early life.

On the other hand, many of the Turkish slaves that we find during the period of al-Ma'mūn may have been adults, meant to immediately complement the army structure. For example, al-Mu'tasim's purchases described above state that he sent out agents to purchase his slaves for him so that by the time of his Egyptian campaign in 214AH (829AD) he already had approximately 4,000 slaves at his command. The time period for their acquisition is relatively short, between five and ten years. For these troops to take an active part in the campaign they must have already been trained in 'Abbāsid style warfare both in archery and especially horse-archery, which are very demanding fields requiring a long period of training and practice. They

²²⁸ David Ayalon, "The Mamluk novice: on his youthfulness and on his original religion," in *Islam and the Abode of War: Military Slaves and Islamic adversaries*, ed. David Ayalon (Aldershot, Great Britain: Variorum, 1994), 2.

could not have been much younger than fifteen years old upon acquisition, therefore, the majority of them were likely considered adults. If they were adults then many of the skills they had were brought with them, and they did not go through the process that later military slave systems used to indoctrinate and train the young boys. Adults could immediately support their masters' policies, and in this case al-Ma'mūn's policies of an absolute *imāmate*.

Of the two hypotheses, their introduction as adults during al-Ma'mūn's time seems more likely. Al-Ma'mūn needed support that he could relatively quickly put into place to offset the influence of the new power groups, and he could do this by using adult Turks. However, the one thing that they would bring (whether boys or adults) to the caliphate was the fact that they were political outsiders with loyalty only to the caliph, and therefore in a position to help him implement his ideology.

In summary, these examples show that while the Turks did bring unique skills with them they were not imported solely because of those skills. Certainly their skill in archery seems to have been unsurpassed; however, they did not seem to add something revolutionary to the army. As the *Tactica* shows, the 'Abbāsids gave priority to mobility and this was a strength of the Turks. The major problem with viewing the characteristics of the Turks as the sole point in the decision making process was that their skills did not lend themselves to the type of fighting that was encountered during al-Ma'mūn's reign. Barring small skirmishes that went unrecorded in the historical records, most of the important fighting was done in sieges and in close-in mountainous areas. Because we do not know at what age many of the Turks were imported and the circumstances of their acquisition we cannot know how much skill they possessed prior to their entrance into the ranks of military slaves and thus, how many of the skills they are extolled for were actually given to them by their

Persian and Arab trainers or came from their native environment. The only viable explanation left for their importation, which only increased under al-Mu'tasim, were the characteristics of loyalty and political alieness.

The Long-Term Effects of Military Slavery

The introduction of military slaves as a political act, with their martial qualities as an additional factor, demonstrates the use of military slaves as primarily a tool used to support al-Ma'mūn's policies. Certainly Turks brought with them martial skills and an uncivilized savageness that al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'tasim likely found attractive. In the short-term, Turkish military slaves met the goal of their acquisition, bringing further stability to the regimes they supported and certainly a level of loyalty surpassing that of al-Ma'mūn's other supporters. However, the long-term effects would eventually weaken the very institution al-Ma'mūn had used military slaves to support, the caliphate. In later years, after al-Ma'mūn's death, 'Abbāsīd military slaves would require greater economic resources than intended. Eventually, the 'Abbāsīds were cut off from the Asian steppes and their slave supply would come under the control of competitors, making slaves more expensive to import. Militarily, they seem to decline soon after al-Mu'tasim and lost some of the hardiness, savagery, and alieness that had once attracted al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'tasim to them. Politically they acquired more influence and power, in direct proportion to the caliph's almost total reliance on them for support against other, sometimes hostile, power groups. As a result, they became partners to the caliph's power, weakening the caliphate. They acquired so much power that at one point they assassinated a caliph and constantly influenced caliphal nominations.²²⁹ Thus, the institution, begun by al-Ma'mūn and further systematized and supported by al-Mu'tasim, to thwart the influence of existing

²²⁹ Bernard Lewis, " 'Abbāsīds," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new version, 18.

VII. CONCLUSION

Al-Mu'tasim's Succession

In 218 AH (833AD) al-Ma'mūn became sick while on campaign in Byzantine lands. For one who so highly prized the office of caliph and had felt the ravages of an unorderedly succession personally, it is surprising that he had not nominated an heir, except for the brief period of 'Alī al-Rida. Perhaps he had not come to that point in the promulgation of his ideological views, or perhaps he held the Mu'tazilite belief that the caliph should be elected, as some have suggested.²³⁰ For whatever reason, the caliph left his decision until the last moments of his life; finally choosing al-Mu'tasim, his brother, instead of his son, al-'Abbās.²³¹

At the time of his death, al-Ma'mūn's support was divided between two people on the campaign with him, al-Mu'tasim and al-'Abbās. Interestingly, al-Mu'tasim's army seems to have been based on the newly acquired military slaves. Virtually all of the slaves acquired under al-Ma'mūn were done so under the care of al-Mu'tasim. Al-'Abbās's armies were made up of al-Ma'mūn's clients. These clients were those who had converted under al-Ma'mūn's reign such as Mazyar and Afshin, the vast majority of them were Eastern elite families. When al-Ma'mūn chose a successor one wonders if he consciously made a choice between the supporters of the successor as well as the person himself. If al-'Abbas had become caliph it is likely that military slavery would have remained a small part of the army and never

²³⁰ Chejne, 119. Truthfully I do not believe al-Ma'mūn wanted his successor to be elected. A succession based on election would either give the power to elect a caliph in the hands of the 'ulamā'—to whom he was in the process of bringing under the control of the caliph or in an extreme example, the common people—who he was afraid of and viewed as ignorant, neither of which makes sense.

²³¹ The situation of the succession is extremely interesting, mostly because it looks as though al-Mu'tasim may have taken advantage to his close proximity to the caliph when he became ill and was able to publish declarations in the name of the caliph. See el-Hibri for a thought provoking discussion of the succession documents.

grown to the overwhelming extent found under al-Mu'tasim's reign. The conflict between the two divisions was plain. After al-Ma'mūn died many of al-Ma'mūn's new Khurāsānī power group wanted to place al-'Abbās on the throne, but were forestalled when he pledged allegiance to his uncle, al-Mu'tasim. Though the view of the army as divided between the two might be overly simplistic, it was only because of al-'Abbās's *bay'a* to al-Mu'tasim that civil war was avoided and in many ways what would have been a replay of what the empire had just gone through between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn.

The Continuities of al-Mu'tasim's Reign

The reign of al-Mu'tasim contributes the greatest evidence that military slavery actually originated under, and was emphasized by, al-Ma'mūn. This statement is evidenced by the four major policies of al-Mu'tasim during his reign, but which all originated in al-Ma'mūn's. First, that al-Ma'mūn's *mihna* continued during al-Mu'tasim's reign is clearly evidenced. Following his brother's wishes to continue pursuing the *mihna* al-Mu'tasim had Ahmad b. Hanbal flogged. Though the actual events are somewhat sketchy, the result wasn't—the citizenry of Baghdād rioted, a sign that Ibn Hanbal's popularity was certainly greater than the caliph's.²³² The *mihna* and the accompanying ideology of the createdness of the Qur'ān did not cease until approximately twenty years later under the reign of the caliph al-Mutawakkil, but it was a policy that had begun under al-Ma'mūn and then continued by al-Mu'tasim.

Second, al-Ma'mūn's war with Byzantium continued with al-Mu'tasim. He finished what al-Ma'mūn had set out to do, at least in part, in his military campaigns. Al-Ma'mūn's goal was to conquer Amorium and thereby weaken the Byzantine

²³² Hinds, *Mihna*; Patton, 2-3.

empire.²³³ Al-Mu'tasim accomplished this goal, but failed to continue al-Ma'mūn's practice of keeping conquered territory under Muslim control. Al-Ma'mūn had driven his campaign by successively taking fortifications and the land surrounding them, then inhabiting them or building new ones, in effect bringing more land under Islamic control. Al-Mu'tasim's campaign, though successful, did not complete the realization of these gains through permanent settlement, but the goal and the process had begun under al-Ma'mūn, with relatively little creativity on al-Mu'tasim's part.

Third, al-Mu'tasim continued al-Ma'mūn's aversion of Arabs. Ibn Khaldūn stated, "The group feeling of the Arabs had been destroyed by the time of the reign of al-Mu'tasim and his son, al-Wāthiq."²³⁴ Al-Mu'tasim seemed to trust the Arabs no more than al-Ma'mūn had while he reigned, but al-Mu'tasim seemed willing to take it even further. Al-Kindī describes this when he writes:

Al-Ma'mūn died...and the Muslims elected Abū Ishāq al-Mu'tasim as caliph. His [al-Mu'tasim's] letter reached Kaydar [the governor of Egypt]. He informed him of his election and ordered him to drop the names of the Arabs from the Diwan and to stop their pay. Kaydar did so.²³⁵

Though al-Kindī does not write about other regions, the purpose of al-Mu'tasim is clearly to degrade the status of the Arabs, because to be registered in the *dīwan* and to receive an *'atā* was a sign of privilege and was a benefit to those families who had fought the original wars of conquest in the seventh century. This action is representative of the further fall of the Arabs. By the time of al-Mu'tasim, the army and bureaucracy were largely staffed by non-Arabs and their supporters.

Lastly, and most important for this discussion, al-Mu'tasim's use of military slavery was a continuation of al-Ma'mūn's. Similar to the *mihna*, the war with Byzantium, and the aversion of the Arabs that were continuations from al-Ma'mūn's

²³³ The Byzantine emperor during the time of al-Ma'mūn originated from Amorium, by sacking that city it sent a clear message of Muslim superiority to the Byzantines.

²³⁴ Ibn Khaldūn, 124.

²³⁵ Al-Kindī in Ayalon, "Military," 21.

reign, so also was the extension of military slavery. Al-Mu'tasim's reign seems to rarely, if ever stray from the path that al-Ma'mūn had already placed it on. The one difference between al-Ma'mūn's use of military slaves and that of al-Mu'tasim's is that the institution was expanded under al-Mu'tasim. A great amount of thought and research by other scholars has gone into the reign of al-Mu'tasim, showing that military slavery became the most important portion of the army, especially with the building of Sāmarrā' and the multitude of reasons for its construction.²³⁶ Al-Mu'tasim also continued to make an effort to expand the Eastern provinces, Balādhurī writes:

[Al-Ma'mūn] wanted a levy among the people of [Transoxania] and the sons of their rulers, and he was most anxious to win them over. Thus, when they arrived at his gate, he showed them honor and lavished favors upon them. Then al-Mu'tasim became caliph and followed the same policy....²³⁷

Balādhurī writes that al-Mu'tasim continued al-Ma'mūn's policies and later adds that all of the important leaders of the military were from this same region.²³⁸ By the end of al-Mu'tasim's reign many of these top commanders would disappear and would be replaced by military slaves. Though al-Mu'tasim clearly took military slavery further than al-Ma'mūn, when combined with the above three policies military slavery must be seen as yet another example of how al-Mu'tasim never deviated from the path his older brother, al-Ma'mūn, laid out. Thus, military slavery did not begin with al-Mu'tasim, but is another example of the continued policies of al-Ma'mūn carried out by al-Mu'tasim.

Al-Ma'mūn's Political and Ideological Genius

Perhaps the thing most missing in al-Mu'tasim's reign was the ambition and genius shown by al-Ma'mūn throughout his entire reign. Al-Ma'mūn seemed to have

²³⁶ See Gordon's book for the best research on this period.

²³⁷ Balādhurī in Forand, "Development," 26.

²³⁸ Balādhurī in *Ibid.*, 26.

had a talent for leading people and in knowing how to motivate supporters while positioning himself in the best way to take advantage of important situations. His entire reign showed his great capacity for political agility and religious motivation.

It is likely that we may never know exactly who was at fault in the succession argument al-Ma'mūn had with his brother al-Amīn, but regardless of fault, al-Ma'mūn dealt with the effects of the civil war and proceeded to introduce his ideology. During the civil war al-Ma'mūn needed a support group. He found this through the intermediary of al-Fadl b. Sahl and probably through his own family connections and through very effective religious propaganda. Once the war was over al-Ma'mūn continued his drive for support which he knew he would need in order to rule the empire, at least half of which was either in rebellion or unfavorable to him. To do this al-Ma'mūn continued to use religious propaganda, a part of which was the nomination of 'Alī al-Rida, and also strove to consolidate his position.

Once al-Ma'mūn realized that he would have to return to Baghdād, he began the next phase of his reign. He began the long journey that would lead him back to Baghdād, during which two important things happened that would make him more acceptable to the people of Baghdād. First, the assassination of al-Fadl helped al-Ma'mūn to separate himself from many of the unpopular policies that came out of Marw (Khurāsān) while he was there. Al-Fadl's death effectively reduced Baghdādī opposition to al-Ma'mūn because al-Fadl had been seen as the instigator of many of al-Ma'mūn's more controversial policies, and this view may have been encouraged by al-Ma'mūn.²³⁹ Second, the death of al-Rida also helped to quell the rebelliousness of the Baghdādīs. Al-Rida, an 'Alid, was the primary reason for the installation of a counter-caliph in Baghdād, and their outright rebellion. With his death, Ibrāhīm b.

²³⁹ See el-Hibri for an interesting take on al-Fadl's murder, el-Hibri, "Reign," 200-207.

Mahdī, the counter-caliph, was deposed and sent into hiding. During this period al-Ma'mūn also allowed himself to change the color of his court from the green of the 'Alids (which he had previously changed it to) back to the traditional black of the 'Abbāsīd house. Each of these things made al-Ma'mūn's entry into Baghdād triumphal instead of a fight and they demonstrate the considerable political flexibility that al-Ma'mūn would continue to show.

The promulgation of al-Ma'mūn's ideology also shows his determination and ambition to reform things that he thought wrong. When al-Ma'mūn chose to enforce his ideology he was well on his way to reunifying the 'Abbāsīd empire and all was relatively quiet. To strengthen the institution of the caliphate, which he believed had been weakened by the civil war, and also which he believed to be the most important institution of Islam, he set about taking greater control of both religious scholarship and the judiciary. By this time, his supporters held most of the elite positions in the administration and greatly controlled the army. As a result, he had the backing to implement the *mihna* and to increase his control of those institutions that would help him have more influence and reinforce his authority and legitimacy as caliph, namely, the judiciary and religious scholarship. At the same time he strove to lessen his dependence on the elite Khurāsānī families. He continued his campaign of religious propaganda by winning territory from the Byzantines, persecuting heretics such as the Khurramiyya, using titles such as "*Khalīfat Allāh*", and implementing changes such as the coinage reforms. Each of these acts show his multi-pronged approach to strengthening his position and the institution of the caliphate. At every point of the way, except perhaps at the beginning of the civil war, al-Ma'mūn used his supporters and his mastery of religious propaganda to gather more support and then to advance his ideas from one power base to another. Military slaves were an important part of

this political maneuvering. The institution was introduced to provide him with a counter-balance to the support groups that had brought him into power. Though military slaves' skills must have been an attraction, their political alienation from groups in Baghdād and their usefulness as a counter-balance to the Khurāsānī elite were the primary reasons for their introduction into the armies of al-Ma'mūn.²⁴⁰

²⁴⁰ See Forand, "Development," 27-29 for a brief sketch of the animosity between these two groups. According to some there also existed a rivalry between the Abnā' and al-Ma'mūn's Khurāsānīs.

APPENDIX A : AN INTRODUCTION TO SLAVERY IN ISLAM

Under three things the earth trembles; under four it cannot bear up: a slave when he becomes king...
—Proverbs 30:21-22²⁴¹

*This status of slavery is indeed a blessing...[the slaves] embrace Islam with the determination of true believers... --Ibn Khaldūn*²⁴²

What is a slave? This question is of the utmost importance, especially in the present day and for this topic. First, the term “slave” is somewhat elusive. In the modern world slavery can have many implications. For instance, slavery is still considered a problem in many countries. Good examples of this are recent articles by the BBC, the New York Times and National Geographic.²⁴³ The BBC article looks at the history of slavery and also includes a portion showing the numbers of people still considered slaves. Most of these consist of people receiving a wage, but being under the total and perpetual control of an individual or organization, called debt slaves. Others are involved in things such as forced prostitution and other similar situations. To the modern mind, slavery, as was found in medieval Islam, can be difficult to understand. Slavery in Islam is not well understood by most people no matter their origin. Perhaps the easiest way to understand slavery in Islam is by briefly comparing it to slavery in the Atlantic, the type of slavery with which many people are more familiar, especially in academia.

²⁴¹ New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America

²⁴² Ibn Khaldūn trans. and quoted in Daniel Pipes, *Slave Soldiers and Islam: The Genesis of a Military System* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981; Charlestown, MA: Acme Bookbinding, 2003), 86.

²⁴³ “World Commemorates End of Slavery,” *BBC News* 23 August 2004, 13 February 2005, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3589646.stm>>. Nicholas D. Kristof, “Cambodia, Where Sex Traffickers are King,” *New York Times* 15 January 2004, 13 February 2005. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/19/opinion/19kristof-cambodia.html?oref=login>> Five-part series on slavery followed this article starting on 17 January 2004. Andrew Cockburn, “21st Century Slaves,” *National Geographic* 204, no. 3 (September 2003): 2-29.

A Brief Comparison of slavery in the Atlantic and in Islam

Slavery certainly existed in pre-Islamic Mecca where important slave markets were located.²⁴⁴ By comparison, the Atlantic slave trade existed from the mid-fifteenth century when European ships began shipping African slaves from Western Africa to Europe.²⁴⁵ However, with the discovery of the New World, the desire to exploit its resources, and Europe's insatiable desire for sugar (which it found as a result of the Crusades), the transatlantic trade soon became a tremendous enterprise. The height of the trade came in the eighteenth century where between 1700-1810 sixty percent of all African slaves were exported to the New World.²⁴⁶ The vast majority of all slaves ended up on sugar and coffee plantations, with approximately forty percent of the slaves ending up in Brazil and forty-five percent arriving in the Caribbean, demonstrating that ninety-five percent of all slaves went to areas heavily involved in sugar and coffee production.²⁴⁷ Thus, only five percent of slaves made it to the Spanish and Northern Americas.²⁴⁸ In many ways, the systems of slavery in the Atlantic and in the Middle Eastern Muslim countries seem to be at odds with one another, yet, they have many things in common, perhaps because of shared religious roots; however, they are also distinct from each other. An investigation of three areas will demonstrate some of their similarities and their differences: philosophy of enslavement, rights and obligations, and the function of slaves in society.

There are, however, differences in the sources of information regarding the two slave systems that must first be explained. First, slavery in the Atlantic lasted a relatively short period of time when compared with slavery in Islam. For this reason,

²⁴⁴ Gordon, 18,19.

²⁴⁵ Philip D. Morgan, "Slave Trade: Transatlantic," in *MacMillan Encyclopedia of World Slavery*, vol. 2, eds., Paul Finkelman and Joseph C. Miller. (New York: Simon & Schuster MacMillan, 1998), 837.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 838.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 840.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 840.

the philosophy of Atlantic slavery seems to be less developed and what we do know concentrates more on the realities of slavery rather than the philosophy of it. Second, and perhaps most important, is that the data for Atlantic slavery centers on the U.S. slavery experience. As noted above, Brazil and the Caribbean imported the vast majority of the slaves, but because the majority of research centers on the U.S., it is vastly over represented in terms of information on both the slave trade itself and the experience of the slaves in the New World. By taking these issues into account, hopefully the reader will be able to better understand the information presented.

The Philosophy of Slavery

Atlantic

The philosophy of the Atlantic slave trade generally relied on religious ideology. The philosophy of the Atlantic slave trade in particular seemed to evolve over the period of the slave trade. In the beginning, traditional Christian philosophies were used to justify slavery. For example, Christians and Jews recognized slavery in part because their scripture did not forbid it, and to some degree even legitimized it.²⁴⁹ For many, slavery was inseparable from the evil in men and was part of God's punishment of Ham for his disobedience.²⁵⁰ Though slavery violated natural law (i.e. slavery did not exist with Adam and Eve), it became connected with sin and punishment.²⁵¹ As a result of this philosophy, slaves came to have a dual personality in the Americas. For example, a court ruled in the case of *Smith v. Gould* in 1708 that "trover could not lie with a Negro slave because an owner did not enjoy an absolute property right in him—for example, he could not legally kill him as he might

²⁴⁹ Gordon, 20. Scripture did this in three ways: It had existed in ancient Israel, it wasn't condemned by apostles, and it wasn't condemned by the church.

²⁵⁰ Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, Inc., 1969), 56.

²⁵¹ Jordan, 54.

an ox."²⁵² In addition, a Kentucky court in 1838 stated, "Slaves are property and must, under our present institutions, be treated as such. But they are human beings, with like passions, sympathies, and affections with our selves."²⁵³ In the philosophy of the Atlantic slave trade, slaves occupied a dual position both as property, but also as human beings.

One other important aspect of the philosophy of Atlantic slavery comes from the justifications for the acquisition of slaves. This philosophy of acquisition and of keeping slaves accurately shows an evolution of ideas that the Western world came to use during this time period. Following the traditional philosophies of slavery, the reasons for acquiring slaves generally based themselves on traditional Christian values and classical thought. For instance, slavery was viewed as a result of the constant struggle for power. Slavery is equated with the captivity that results from the loss of a contest of power.²⁵⁴ As nations warred against one another, slavery and captivity were viewed as the alternative to execution of all prisoners. Slaves were also viewed as infidels and heathen. In the words of one writer, slavery is caused by the "perpetual enmity between Christians, infidels, and heathen."²⁵⁵ This demonstrates that slavery, in addition to the result of war between nations, slavery was also the consequence of unbelief.²⁵⁶ However, as the issue of slavery became more antagonistic, particularly as the American Civil War drew nearer, the philosophy of slavery and the acquisition of slaves evolved. James Henley Thornwell, one of slavery's defenders in the American South, wrote that slavery

²⁵² Patrick M. O'Neil, "Slavery Cases in English Common Law," in *MacMillan Encyclopedia of World Slavery*, vol. 2. eds., Paul Finkelman and Joseph C. Miller (New York: Simon & Schuster MacMillan, 1998), 497. "Trover" was an English common-law action "for the value of property or chattels improperly converted to the use of another." See O'Neil, *Slavery in English Common Law*, 497.

²⁵³ Jenny Bourne Wahl, "Law: U.S. South," in *MacMillan Encyclopedia of World Slavery*, vol. 2. eds. Paul Finkelman and Joseph C. Miller (New York: Simon & Schuster MacMillan, 1998), 513.

²⁵⁴ Jordan, 55, 56.

²⁵⁵ See *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁵⁶ O'Neil, "Slavery in English Common Law," 497.

secured the rights of property and safeguarded against pauperism.²⁵⁷ What he argued was that slavery benefited society, by taking the expected productivity of the laborer and using it in a positive way. In addition, the slave master should provide food, clothing, and other necessities for the slave, thereby avoiding the pauperism that would occur should the slaves be freed, and their capacity for labor lost.²⁵⁸ Thus, the Atlantic slavery system based itself, at first, on Christian precepts and tradition, justifying slavery as being better than execution in the case of war, and as a punishment for unbelief and sin in the case of religion. However, as the antagonism to slavery grew stronger, the philosophy of slavery changed to argue that it was a great benefit to society and to the slave himself.

Slavery

The advent of Islam changed many aspects of slavery in the Middle Eastern world. Many opinions exist on the Prophet's attitudes about slavery, some say that he meant it to gradually fade away, while others believe that he meant only to reform it.²⁵⁹ Regardless of the Prophet's intent, he permitted slavery because it was not overtly outlawed, but he also reformed it through his revelations and actions.

In Islam, freedom was the natural state of human beings.²⁶⁰ This important distinction was similar to English common law, where the courts also leaned toward the view that the natural state of a person was freedom, and not slavery. Also similar to Atlantic slavery is the fact that Islam views slavery as a possible consequence of unbelief, but Islam provides a path for unbelievers to come into the "fold" of Islam, though conversion to Islam after becoming a slave did not release them from

²⁵⁷ James Henley Thornwell quoted in *The Old South*, ed. Mark M. Smith (Oxford and Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2001), 125.

²⁵⁸ Thornwell quoted in *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁵⁹ Gordon, 19.

²⁶⁰ Patrick M. O'Neil, "Law: Islamic Law," in *MacMillan Encyclopedia of World Slavery*, vol. 2, eds., Paul Finkelman and Joseph C. Miller (New York: Simon & Schuster MacMillan, 1998), 494.

slavery.²⁶¹ Slavery in Islam also had additional regulations, such as those forbidding enslaving Muslims and the ability of people to avoid enslavement during war by gaining dhimmī status, which provided for a contractual arrangement of tribute in return for freedom of life, property, etc.,²⁶²

As with Atlantic slavery, how slaves were acquired and the justifications for acquisition gives added insight into its philosophy in Islam. For Islam, acquisition was relatively simple. There were three ways of acquisition: *jihād*, birth, and purchase.²⁶³ Birth and *jihād* were the most common forms of acquisition in the early era of Islam. Birth resulted from being born to slave parents and enslavement as a result of *jihād* was seen as a repayment of the losses that occurred because of *jihād*.²⁶⁴ The purchase of a free person into slavery (i.e. a child be sold into slavery), the final mode of acquisition, was eventually recognized by most jurists.²⁶⁵ Though the above may be an oversimplification of the philosophies of both systems of slavery, it shows that both philosophies were relatively simple, and based on religion—for Islam as a way to bring the unbeliever into contact with Islam, providing an opportunity for conversion and for Atlantic slavery a religious belief based primarily on sin. The differences come into play because Atlantic philosophy evolved into the view that slavery benefited the slave and the society (which might also be said in Muslim society where the slave converts to Islam) and in Islam the primacy of *jihād* or war as

²⁶¹ See John Alembillah Azumah, *The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 124-5; John Ralph Willis, "The Ideology of Enslavement in Islam," in *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*, vol. 1, *Islam and the Ideology of Enslavement*, ed., John Ralph Willis (London and Totowa, New Jersey: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1985), 4.

²⁶² Some slaves were Muslim, but they either converted after enslavement or they were enslaved after their conversion; however, most scholars viewed enslavement after conversion as being illegal, and it was the responsibility of the master to verify the slaves status prior to purchase (though of course Muslim enslavement still occurred). Gordon, 24; John Ralph Willis, "Jihad and the Ideology of Enslavement," in *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*, vol. 1, *Islam and the Ideology of Enslavement*, ed., John Ralph Willis (London and Totowa, New Jersey: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1985), 16-7.

²⁶³ Gordon, 21; Azumah, 125; William D. Phillips, *Slavery from Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 68.

²⁶⁴ Gordon, 24; Willis, "Jihad," 22.

²⁶⁵ Azumah, 125.

a means of acquisition, whereas most slaves in Atlantic slavery were purchased outside of a wartime context.

One topic somewhat avoided in this paper, though important to the philosophy of enslavement, is that of manumission—how is a slave released from bondage? This topic has, and will be, largely avoided in this thesis because of the complexities involved, but manumission highlights the differences between the two systems and is worthwhile, if only briefly touched upon. One main reason for the brief treatment is that manumission in the U.S. varied from state to state because the laws governing slavery were largely passed by state governments, leaving no single answer in the question of how a slave was manumitted. However, two things might be said of manumission in the U.S. First, as time drew nearer to the Civil War, states made it increasingly difficult for masters to manumit slaves and freed slaves would often have to leave the state, if they desired to remain free. Second, unlike Islam, U.S. slavery did not have degrees of manumission that could be given to a slave. For instance, in Islam four main types of slaves appear, each category defined by the degree of manumission the slave had attained: full-fledged slavery, *mudabbar* (a slave who had a guarantee of emancipation upon the owner's death), *umm walad* (a concubine who has children that are claimed by the master and who was freed upon his death), *mukatab* (slave who has made a contract for his manumission).²⁶⁶ Thus, the topic of manumission, beyond what was stated above, compels an answer much too complex for the current study.

²⁶⁶ O'Neil, "Islamic," 495.

Atlantic

The rights of slaves seem to be few in Atlantic slavery. One of the first examples to ensure slaves had rights came from a declaration of the Spanish crown and the Catholic church in 1524. The primary purposes of the document was to try to ameliorate slave life, give slaves the right to marry, and to Christianize them.²⁶⁷ Little evidence remains to determine if these rights were actually implemented, but it does show that concern for the state of slaves existed and that they did have some rights under the law. Our most useful examples come from the U.S., where slaves, as stated above, had different rights according to the state they resided in.²⁶⁸ However, some important issues (showing both rights and the lack of rights in certain areas) in U.S. law are the following: a person could not kill or maim a slave,²⁶⁹ slaves could not bear witness except against another slave,²⁷⁰ slaves could not marry without consent of the master,²⁷¹ slaves had no parental rights to their children,²⁷² most states required masters to give food and clothing to slaves,²⁷³ manumission was an inherent right of owners (though it was restricted beginning in the 1830's),²⁷⁴ criminal penalties were more harsh for slaves than free men,²⁷⁵ and conversion to Christianity would free a slave (later this would be revoked).²⁷⁶ Slaves rights can essentially be reduced to

²⁶⁷ Phillips, 206.

²⁶⁸ Patrick M. O'Neil, "Law: Overview of U.S. Law." In *MacMillan Encyclopedia of World Slavery*, vol. 2. eds., Paul Finkelman and Joseph C. Miller (New York: Simon & Schuster MacMillan, 1998), 504.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 504; Wahl, 520.

²⁷⁰ O'Neil, "Law," 504.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 504.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 504.

²⁷³ Wahl, 520.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 521.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 522.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 523.

food, clothing, life, and limb. Obligations of slaves are rarely spoken of, but slaves were expected to work hard and be loyal to their master.

Islam

Theoretically the Islamic institution of *hisbah* gave slaves certain human rights.²⁷⁷ These human rights took many forms. For instance, similar to U.S. laws, slaves could marry with the consent of their master.²⁷⁸ Unlike Atlantic slavery, Muslims were forbidden to separate a mother and her young children, but slaves rights in Islam went farther than this.²⁷⁹ Muslims were forbidden to force a female slave into prostitution and had to adhere to certain standards of slave treatment, such as: not overworking them, denying them adequate rest, and physically maltreating them.²⁸⁰ Owners who did not follow these standards were morally obligated to sell the slave, and the slave had a right to go before a *qāḍī* if abuses occurred to force the master to sell the slave.²⁸¹ Primarily, these rights and encouragements for slave owners came from early sources. For example, the *Qur'ān* entreats owners to "Marry...the pious among your male and female slaves"²⁸² and that alms should be used, "only for the poor and the needy...and [to free] slaves."²⁸³ In addition to these *Qur'ānic* passages, other *hadīth* also encourages certain actions. For example, in al-Bukharī's *al-Jamī' al-sahīh* the Prophet is reported to have said, "Whoever owns a slave girl and educates her, and is good to her, and frees her and marries her, shall

²⁷⁷ Muhammad 'Abdul Jabbar Beg, "The 'Serfs' of Islamic Society Under the 'Abbāsīd Regime," *Islamic Culture* 49, no. 2 (April, 1975): 109; See also Al-Māwardī, *Al-Akhām al-Sultāniyya w'al-Wilāyāt al-Dīniyya* (*The Ordinances of Government*), trans. Wafaa H. Wahba (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing Limited, 1996; Garnet Publishing Limited, 2000), 279 (Citations follow the paperback edition).

²⁷⁸ Gordon, 37; Ronald Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 36; O'Neil, "Islam," 494; Jabbar Beg: 109.

²⁷⁹ Segal, 36.

²⁸⁰ Gordon, 37-8; O'Neil, "Islam," 494.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 38.

²⁸² Qur'ān 24:32-33 trans. and quoted in John Hunwick and Eve Troutt Powell, *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2001), 4.

²⁸³ Qur'ān 9:60 trans. and quoted in Hunwick, 4.

have a double reward [from God]" and "Let no one say 'my slave' or 'my slave-girl,' but rather 'my boy' or 'my girl,' or 'my lad.'"²⁸⁴ Al-Ghazālī, in his passage on "Huqūq al-mamlūk," details the rights of slaves, essentially pointing out that a master is obligated to feed and clothe his slaves with what he himself wears and that those who treat their slaves badly will not enter into paradise.²⁸⁵ Al-Ghazālī's examples are also largely based on various acts of the Prophet. In addition, unlike Atlantic slavery, in Islamic law punishments for slaves were less than those for free men.²⁸⁶ Each of these sets the standard for the rights and treatment of the slave in Islam, which definitely encouraged slave masters to be kind and to treat their slaves well. The slaves' obligation in Islam primarily consisted of being loyal, obedient, and trustworthy to his master.²⁸⁷ These views, when compared to Atlantic slavery, show a much greater determination on the part of Islam to encourage good treatment of slaves, and in some cases greater opportunity for social mobility.

Functions in Society

Some of the differences in the two systems and their philosophies and rights might be explained by the different functions that slaves provided in the two societies. Atlantic slavery was generally based on productive, labor intensive roles, whereas slavery in Islam largely based itself on domestic roles. One key indicator showing a significant difference between the two societal functions was that the ratio in the Atlantic trade was two males for every female, but Islam imported two females for

²⁸⁴ Hadīth no. 720, 728, trans. and quoted in Hunwick, 7.

²⁸⁵ Abū Hamīd al-Ghazālī, "Huqūq al-mamlūk," in *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, vol. 2, (Egypt: Dār Ihyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabīyah, 1957), 219-221.

²⁸⁶ See al-Māwardī's chapter on "Crimes and Punishments."

²⁸⁷ O'Neil, "Islam," 494.

every male.²⁸⁸ Obviously, the types of functions varied greatly between these two systems.

Atlantic

Atlantic slavery was based on business and labor. Black slaves were most popular because of the relative cheapness and their reputation for physical strength and endurance.²⁸⁹ Three main functions were filled by slaves: labor, domestic, and other miscellaneous occupations. Labor composed the primary function of slaves crossing the Atlantic with the majority of slaves disembarking in either the Caribbean or Brazil. Work within the sphere of this function consisted mainly in sugar, cotton, or other plantations, and mines.²⁹⁰ These jobs were stressful and physically demanding. Domestic servants often served as maids, cooks, and various other occupations. Interestingly, because of the prevalence of labor functions relatively little information can be found on domestic and other functions provided by slaves in American societies. However, many other occupations also existed, some examples are artisans, transportation, carpenters, soldiers, concubines, and more.²⁹¹ Most of the functions listed, other than labor, existed prior to the seventeenth century when plantation farming became large and an key ingredient to New World colonies.²⁹²

Islam

Muslims, by contrast, used slaves in many more varied capacities; however, just as Atlantic slavery defined itself through the primary function of labor, Islam defined slavery in primarily non-productive and non-labor intensive functions (i.e. non-agricultural). One of the defining uses of slaves in Islam was that of military

²⁸⁸ Segal, 4.

²⁸⁹ Gordon, 48.

²⁹⁰ Phillips, 199-201.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 215, 217.

²⁹² Ibid., 215.

slavery. Though military slavery was found in many other societies, it had a long and full history in Islam until into the nineteenth century.²⁹³ One important example in the beginning of the institution was the Caliph al-Mu'tasim who purchased slaves for military purposes from many places. One of the slaves that he purchased prior to his ascension to the caliphate, Ashinas, became one of the most powerful military leaders under al-Mu'tasim in the beginning of the ninth century, showing that not only did slaves perform the function of soldiers, but also leaders in the army.²⁹⁴ One of the common functions of slaves was that of business partner. Here a slave might have varying duties, a slave with the status of *ma'dhūn* at times could act independently of his master and also sign contracts in his master's name.²⁹⁵ Slaves also fulfilled the need for agricultural labor in Islamic society; for instance, the famed Zutt and Zanj slaves who rebelled in the ninth century.²⁹⁶ Though most of the time slaves were not used in agriculture, they do sometimes appear as agriculture or mine laborers, as in the Zutt and Zanj example.²⁹⁷ Here a comparison might be made to the Atlantic trade, that the condition of slaves used in labor occupations seems to compare equally to those of the Atlantic trade, in that it was hard labor and physically demanding.²⁹⁸

Many of the functions slaves in Islam filled came within the sphere of the household. Concubines, entertainers, cooks, midwives, foster mothers, and many

²⁹³ For example, Muhammad 'Alī raised a contingent of black soldiers that he used as a body guard.

²⁹⁴ Osman S. A. Ismail, "Mu'tasim and the Turks," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (1966): 17; Ya'qubī records al-Mu'tasim's purchase of Ashinas in Baghdad, see Ya'qubī, *Kitāb*, 22.

²⁹⁵ Gordon, 41; Phillips, 68, 71; Willis, "Ideology," 3.

²⁹⁶ Zutt slave rebellion from 205-220AH (820-835AD); Zanj rebellion from (877-833AD). See C.E. Bosworth, "al-Zutt," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new version; Alexandre Popovic, *The Revolt of African Slaves in Iraq in the 3rd/9th Century*, trans. Leon King (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1999), 3.

²⁹⁷ Phillips, 67, 68; Azumah, 162; Shaun E. Marmon, "Domestic Slavery in the Mamluk Empire: A Preliminary Sketch," in *Slavery in the Islamic Middle East*, ed. Shaun E. Marmon (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1999), 13.

²⁹⁸ For one example of the conditions of slaves see al-Tabarī's description of the work in southern Iraq by the Zutt.

other functions were often reserved for slaves in wealthy households.²⁹⁹ One of the most interesting type of slave with a particular function found in Islam that is not found in the Atlantic trade was that of eunuch.³⁰⁰ Eunuchs were often used in many different duties, mainly having to do with guarding the harem of a ruler, but they could also be military leaders and administrators of high rank. Some slaves were involved in many different tasks, or were specialized. In one example, a slave was purchased by three partners, in addition to his daily duty of grinding enough grain for all three partners, he would rotate in helping each in his occupation; one day working with the carpenter, the second day with the olive oil merchant, and the third day with the shopkeeper.³⁰¹ Other slaves were chosen because of skills they possessed. For instance, in quelling river pirates, al-Mu'tasim, "sent for the Egyptians whom he had brought back as captives, and who were accustomed (to fighting) in the water, for they could dive like fish."³⁰² Islam clearly used slaves in a much more varied capacity than Atlantic slavery did, but the functions of the societies differed a great deal. Islam used slaves for a very wide variety of tasks, that could result in social mobility and real power, whether in the bureaucracy, the military, or the harem. Atlantic slavery on the other hand largely used slaves to fulfill a need for labor workers. Thus, when comparing the different functions slaves played in these societies the system in Islam appears much more diverse than the Atlantic system, especially when compared with the post sixteenth century Atlantic trade.

Conclusion

Atlantic philosophy believed that slavery was a result of sin and captivity, but as the issue grew contentious in the 1800's the added philosophy of slavery being

²⁹⁹ Phillips, 75, 68; O'Neil, "Islam," 495; Jabbar Beg: 112.

³⁰⁰ Phillips, 68, 74-5.

³⁰¹ Phillips, 70.

³⁰² Forand, "development," 20.

beneficial to society and to the slave appeared. Islamic philosophy on the other hand used slavery as a path (one of many) to conversion, or at least subservience to Islam and the will of Allāh.³⁰³ In combination with its philosophy, Islam promotes humane behavior and the encouragement to manumit slaves, giving slaves rights of marriage, humane treatment, food, clothing, and other things. Atlantic slavery also gave rights to the slave, in many ways similar to those of Islam. Food, clothing, human treatment, and life round out its list of rights given to slaves. Finally, the functions of slaves in society contrast greatly between those found in Islam and those in the Atlantic. Functions performed in Atlantic slavery primarily pertained to intensive labor, while those in Islam varied much more, with labor providing only a small portion of the functions fulfilled by slaves in Islam. The best example of the complexity which slavery might obtain in Islam comes from the account of Ibn Butlān where he recounts that the best slave girl would be a Berber who:

should be taken from her country at the age of nine; then, she should be kept in Madinah for three years and three years in Makkah, then she may be taken to 'Iraq at the age of fifteen to be trained in cultural refinement. Thus after going through all the stages of training, when she is sold at the age of twenty-five, she combines in herself the feminine qualities of the Medinese women, the delicacy of a Makkan and the cultural refinement of an 'Iraqi.³⁰⁴

This detailed training regimen for the perfect slave girl is not the only one, other lists exist—including those showing what function each ethnicity was best for. This type of detail can be astounding, especially when compared against Atlantic slavery, which was relatively direct and simple in comparison. Another example of this complexity were military slaves. They, like the Berber girl, might be taken at a young age and then trained for various positions in the military and the administration. Once in these positions they might gain great power and influence—something never available to

³⁰³ See Willis, "Ideology."

³⁰⁴ Jabbar Beg: 110.

Atlantic slaves. The three areas of philosophy, rights and obligations, and functions, show that though the two systems of slavery were different in many ways and that they also shared many traits, hopefully leading to a better understanding of both societies and their different attitudes to slavery.

184/85 - Slave trade documents drafted by Harth al-Dhali, al-Ma'mun's father.

193/89 - Death of the Caliph Harth al-Dhali.

194/90 - Al-Amin declares his son, Musa, his successor.

195/91 - 'Ali b. 'Abd al-Malik sent by al-Amin with an army to quell the rebellion in Khurasan.

196/92 - Battle of Mada'in in a battle near Rayy.

198/94 - Al-Amin executed while trying to surrender to Harthum b. A'yan.

199/95 - Al-Ma'mun writes the letter proclaiming the doctrine of the transcendence of the Qur'an.

201/97 - 'Ali al-Rida's appointment as caliph.

202/98 - Al-Ma'mun leaves Mada'in, Khurasan, on journey back to Baghdad.

207/99 - Al-Fadl b. 'Abd al-Malik is murdered.

208/100 - Al-Fadl dies.

209/101 - Al-Ma'mun enters Baghdad.

Al-Ma'mun begins implementation of the reforms.

210/102 - Church reforms begin.

210/102 - Al-Ma'mun's marriage to Shams al-Ma'mun b. 'Abd al-Malik.

212/104 - Creedence of Qur'an doctrine declared.

214/106 - Al-Ma'mun's campaign in Egypt with 40,000 military slaves.

215/107 - Al-Ma'mun's first campaign against Byzantium.

216/108 - Al-Ma'mun's second campaign against Byzantium.

217/109 - Al-Ma'mun's third campaign against Byzantium.

APPENDIX B : IMPORTANT DATES IN AL-MA'MŪN'S LIFE

A.H./A.D.

170/786 – Birth of al-Ma'mūn.

186/802 – Succession document drafted by Harūn al-Rashīd, al-Ma'mūn's father.

193/809 – Death of the Caliph Harūn al-Rashīd.

194/810 – Al-Amīn declares his son, Mūsā, his successor.

195/811 – 'Alī b. 'Īsā b. Māhān sent by al-Amīn with an army to quell the rebellion in Khurāsān.

– Tāhir kills Māhān in a battle near Rayy.

198/813 – Al-Amīn executed while trying to surrender to Harthama b. A'yan.

199/814 – Al-Ma'mūn writes the letter proclaiming the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'ān.

201/817 – 'Alī al-Rida's nomination as successor.

202/818 – Al-Ma'mūn leaves Marw, Khurāsān, to journey back to Baghdād.

203/818 – Al-Fadl b. Sahl is murdered.

– Al-Rida dies.

204/819 – Al-Ma'mūn enters Baghdād.

– Al-Ma'mūn begins recentralization of the empire.

206/821 – Coinage reforms begin.

210/825 – Al-Ma'mūn's marriage to Būrān bt. al-Hasan b. Sahl.

212/827 – Createdness of Qur'ān doctrine declared.

214/829 – Al-Mu'tasim campaigns in Egypt with 4000 military slaves.

215/830 – Al-Ma'mūn's first campaign against Byzantium.

216/831 – Al-Ma'mūn's second campaign against Byzantium.

217/832 – Al-Ma'mūn's third campaign against Byzantium.

218/833 – Letters sent beginning the *mihna*, while on third campaign.

– Al-Ma'mūn's death.

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