

3. ʿAyyār Activity in Sīstān and the Rise of the Ṣaffārīds

“Guarding one night in the path of God [i. e. the Jihad], may He be exalted, is more praiseworthy than a thousand nights [during which] one maintains nightly vigils and daily fasting.”

– Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, no. 433¹

Virtue he had, deserving to command:
His brandish'd sword did blind men with his beams:
His arms spread wider than a dragon's wings;
His sparking eyes, replete with wrathful fire,
More dazzled and drove back his enemies
Than mid-day sun fierce bent against their faces.

– Henry VI, Part 1

In the last chapter, we saw how an independent, fervently Sunni movement of volunteer warriors for the faith arose in the border areas of the central Islamic lands. We also saw that it was in this milieu, of Sunni warfare for the faith against both Infidels and Khārijite heretics, that ʿ*ayyārān* first appear in the sources. It is very difficult to extract from the material dealing with the early ninth century, though, precisely what the connection was between volunteer warfare and the ʿ*ayyārān*. Fortunately, this situation changes dramatically with the mid-ninth century appearance of the most famous historical ʿ*ayyār*, and the one about whom we possess the most abundant information: the founder of the Ṣaffārīd Dynasty, Yaʿqūb b. al-Layth al-Ṣaffār.²

In order to understand the nature of this first of the autonomous dynasties in the Eastern Islamic lands, but also ʿ*ayyārī*, one must first comprehend the political situation of the Islamic heartlands in the mid-ninth century. By the 860s, the ʿAbbāsīd caliphs had become shadow figures in Sāmarrāʾ, prisoners of their own Turkish soldiers.³ In that same decade, after having unified Sīstān, riven for many decades by internal religious and factional struggles,⁴ Yaʿqūb b. al-Layth al-Ṣaffār

¹ See also no. 558: “*Ribāʿ* of one day in the path of God ...” etcetera.

² For a more concise overview of Yaʿqūb’s career than that laid out in this and the following two chapters, *vide* D. G. Tor, “Historical Representations of Yaʿqūb b. al-Layth: A Reappraisal,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* Series 3, 12:3 (2002), pp. 247-275.

³ On this period of ʿAbbāsīd decline, see Fārūq ʿUmar, *al-Khilāfa al-ʿabbāsiyya fī-ʿaṣr al-fawḍā al-ʿaskariyya 247-334 A. H. 861-946 A. D.* [sic], Baghdad, 1977), *passim*, and Roy P. Mottahedeh, “The ʿAbbāsīd Caliphate in Iran,” *The Cambridge History of Iran. Volume IV: The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs*, ed. R. N. Frye, Cambridge, 1975, pp. 76-78.

⁴ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, pp. 156-200.

emerged from his native province to take possession of one ‘Abbāsīd territory after another. By his death in 265/879, he was the most powerful ruler in the Islamic world.⁵

The importance of the establishment of the Ṣaffārid dynasty in the mid-ninth century has in many respects long been recognized by historians. The formation of the Ṣaffārid realm, for instance, is seen as having ended the political unity of the caliphal heartland, and for inaugurating in the Central Islamic lands the appearance of autonomous dynasties whose power was obtained by force of arms and then given post-facto caliphal legitimation.⁶ This was an innovation which henceforth became the normative pattern of accession to power followed by all the great medieval dynasties – Sāmānids, Ghaznavids, Būyids, Saljūqs, and so forth – which stepped forward to assume and wield the power that had been lost by the caliphs.⁷

The Ṣaffārids also possess yet another significance and uniqueness in Islamic history: they were the first dynasty to spring from the ‘*ayyārs*. Not only did Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth begin his career as the member of an ‘*ayyār* band dedicated to fighting heretics in the province of Sīstān; the backbone of his army consisted of ‘*ayyār* forces.⁸ While we have indications that ‘*ayyārs* constituted a significant

⁵ Not only did Ya‘qūb’s empire stretched from the borders of India and Central Asia in the east to the borders of ‘Irāq in the west, but the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 233, says that the *khuṭba* had been said in his name in Mecca and Medina; Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 9, p. 516, states that Ya‘qūb commanded “the *shurṭa* in Madīnat al-Salām.” Ibn Khallikān, too, relates that Ya‘qūb was deputed “Khurāsān, Fāris, Kirmān, al-Rayy, Qumm, and Iṣbahān ... and the two *shurṭas* of Baghdād and Samarra’ ...” Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Ja‘far al-Narshakhī, *Tārīkh-i Bukhārā*, Tehran, 1363/1984, p. 109, states that he held at least theoretical lordship in Central Asia as well.

⁶ The Tāhirids do not qualify for this title because they were from the beginning Caliphal appointees. In the words of C. E. Bosworth: “The establishment of a vast if transient empire in the Islamic east, based on Sīstān, was the first great breach in the territorial integrity of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate, for whilst the Tāhirid governors in Khurāsān ruled with a Caliphal approval which had been bestowed in a fairly spontaneous manner, the grudging and sporadic recognition which the Caliphs were at times compelled to grant to Ya‘qūb ... was exacted ...” C. E. Bosworth, *Sīstān Under the Arabs*, p. 109. The Zanj do not qualify for this position either for several reasons. First, their rebellion began later (in 255/868). Second, they wished to replace the caliphate, not control it. Third, their rebellion was, however much of a nuisance, purely local, never enjoyed wide popular support, and in all its fourteen years never managed to spread beyond southern ‘Irāq; see Popovic, *La révolte des esclaves, en Iraq au III-IX siècle*, Paris, 1976, *passim*.

⁷ On this point *vide* D. G. Tor, “Privatized Jihad and Public Order in the Pre-Saljūq Period: The Role of the *Mutaṭawwi‘a*”, *Iranian Studies* 38:4 (2005), pp. 555-573.

⁸ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, pp. 193, 194-195, and 198; Abū Sa‘īd ‘Abd al-Ḥasan b. al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Maḥmūd Gardīzī, *Tārīkh-i Gardīzī*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Habībī, Tehran, 1363/1944, p. 355; Mustawfī Qazvīnī, *Tārīkh-i guzīda*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥusayn Navā‘ī, Tehran, 1339/1960, p. 370; Bahā‘ al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Ḥasan b. Isfandīyār, *Tārīkh-i Ṭabarīstān*, ed. ‘Abbās Iqbāl, Tehran, 1942, p. 245; and, in the secondary literature, C. E. Bosworth, *The History of the Ṣaffārids*, pp. 70-73.

part of other rulers' armies – for example that of the Sāmānids⁹ – these indications are more in the nature of fragmentary bits of information than detailed descriptions. The Ṣaffārid-ʿ*ayyār* alliance is uniquely well-documented, largely but not wholly due to a remarkable local history, the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*.

Despite all the above, in some ways the Ṣaffārid dynasty has been little understood by modern historians. They have failed to discern any ideology motivating the Ṣaffārid state, and have viewed Ṣaffārid activities instead as exemplifying nothing more than brute force and the lust for power. In espousing this view, historians have in effect chosen one of two competing stances found in the primary sources themselves. The goal of the next several chapters will be to examine the road not taken – the view of the Ṣaffārids, and in particular of the dynasty's founder, Yaʿqūb, which is not the one that has traditionally been embraced by scholars. In short, we shall explore the possibility that Yaʿqūb was a *mutaṭawwīʿ* – a religious warrior for Sunni Islam.

For the moment, however, let us consider the first position, the one that has until now been commonly accepted. Modern historians have traditionally regarded the founder of the Ṣaffārid dynasty, Yaʿqūb b. al-Layth al-Ṣaffār, as a self-seeking adventurer. Thus, to cite only a few examples, the nineteenth-century German historian Nöldeke speaks of Yaʿqūb's prime motivation as having been "love of conquest."¹⁰ Likewise, Busse contrasts "Governors and local rulers in the eastern part of the empire [who] founded their political independence on armed force, such as the Ṣaffārids," with those who founded their power "on religious conceptions, such as the Zaydites."¹¹ The contemporary scholar C. E. Bosworth refers to Yaʿqūb's "unashamed proclamation of the superiority of force over the ethical values which were supposed to underpin the temporal authority delegated by God to man;" concluding that Yaʿqūb's "dominant motive ... in addition to ... hatred of the ʿAbbāsids, seems to have been a sheer love of military conquest."¹²

Yet, while negative views about the Ṣaffārids in general and Yaʿqūb in particular are rife among modern Orientalists, when one examines closely this seeming wall of consensus he is surprised to discover that it rests upon a very meager foundation of research. In fact, before the several re-evaluations of the later twentieth century, no extensive research at all was ever done on the Ṣaffārids;

⁹ Al-Qāḍī al-Rashīd b. al-Zubayr [attributed], *Kitāb al-dhakhbāʿir waʿl-tuhaf*, Kuwait, 1959, pp. 145-148; and *infra*, chapter 8. Jürgen Paul, *Herrscher, Gemeinwesen, Vermittler: Ostiran und Transoxanien in vormongolischer Zeit*, p. 116, is aware of the crucial role of *mutaṭawwīʿa* in the Sāmānid army, but not of that of the ʿ*ayyārān*.

¹⁰ Th. Nöldeke, "Yakūb the Coppersmith and his Dynasty," *Sketches from Eastern History*, tr. John Sutherland Black, London, 1892, p. 187.

¹¹ H. Busse, "The Revival of Persian Kingship under the Buyids," D. S. Richards, ed., *Islamic Civilization 950-1150*, London, 1973, p. 48.

¹² Bosworth, "The Armies of the Ṣaffārids," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 31 (1968), p. 536.

most historians simply repeated the (somewhat disparaging) tone taken by Nöldeke in the previous century.¹³ Until recently there were only four articles and no monographs devoted to the early Ṣaffārids. Three of the four articles were written before the mid-1930s, and therefore utilized a much more limited source base than that which we have today.¹⁴ Moreover, one of the three articles is actually a numismatic rather than an historical work.

The fourth article, written by S. M. Stern, not only utilized very few of the available sources, but also based its entire thesis upon one poem which only one source claims was written while the author was at the Ṣaffārid ruler Ya'qūb's court.¹⁵ From the evidence of this lone poem Stern formulated the idea that Ya'qūb was a proponent of Persian nationalism.¹⁶

This article had an influence disproportionate to the amount of research involved in it. Stern's Persian nationalist thesis was taken up in the late twentieth century by the two authors who produced the first book-length studies on the dynasty: Muḥammad Bāstānī-Pārīzī, who wrote a non-scholarly, quasi historical novel specifically about Ya'qūb;¹⁷ and C. E. Bosworth. Bosworth is, in fact, the only person who has ever consulted almost the full range of source material on the Ṣaffārids available to the modern scholar, and in particular the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, the most important primary source extant.¹⁸ He has produced the only scholarly monograph and several articles dealing with the Ṣaffārids.

Unfortunately, even this most recent scholarship has remained under the strong influence of previous writings, following one stream – the wrong stream, we shall argue – in the primary sources to the detriment and exclusion of the other. In particular, these more recent works have continued to neglect the persistent and repeated statements in the sources regarding Ya'qūb's religious motivation, probably in large part due to the phenomenon so perspicuously observed by Bernard Lewis:

¹³ Nöldeke, "Yakūb the Coppersmith," *op. cit.*, pp. 176-206. A good example of the dismissive view faithfully repeated can be found in Barthold, "Zur Geschichte der Ṣaffāriden," in *Orientalische Studien zu Theodor Nöldeke gewidmet*, ed. C. Bezold, Giessen, 1906, vol. I, pp. 171-191, *passim*, and *idem.*, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, 3rd ed., trans. T. Minorsky, ed. C. E. Bosworth, Taipei, 1968, pp. 215-218.

¹⁴ Namely, the two aforementioned articles by Nöldeke and Barthold; and R. Vasmer's "Über die Münzen der Ṣaffāriden und ihrer Gegner in Fārs und Ḥurāsān," *Numismatische Zeitschrift*, Neue Folge 23: 63 (1930), pp. 131-162.

¹⁵ Shihāb al-Dīn Abū 'Abd Allāh Yāqūt al-Hamawī, *Muḥjam al-udabā': Irshād al-arīb ilā ma'rifat al-adīb*, ed. 'Umar al-Fārūq al-Ṭabbā', Beirut, 1420/1999, vol. 1, p. 262. It should be noted that even this source never states that Ya'qūb ever actually had knowledge of or even saw the poem – let alone approved it; merely that it was written while the author was staying with Ya'qūb's entourage ("*inda Ya'qūb*").

¹⁶ S. M. Stern, "Ya'qūb the Coppersmith and Persian national sentiment," in *Iran and Islam, in memory of the late Vladimir Minorsky*, ed. C. E. Bosworth, Edinburgh, 1970, pp. 535-55.

¹⁷ M. Bāstānī-Pārīzī, *Ya'qūb-i Layth*, Tehran, 1367/c1988.

¹⁸ Bosworth himself notes this in *The Ṣaffārids of Sīstān*, p. 8.

... When Europeans ceased to accord first place to religion in their thoughts, sentiments, interests, and loyalties, they also ceased to admit that other men, in other times and places, could have done so. To a rationalistic and materialistic generation, it was inconceivable that such great debates and mighty conflicts could have involved no more than 'merely' religious issues. And so historians ... devised a series of explanations, setting forth what they described as the 'real' or 'ultimate' significance 'underlying' religious movements and differences.¹⁹

The syndrome described by Lewis is very much in evidence in the late-twentieth century re-evaluations of the Ṣaffārids. Thus, various historians have accordingly constructed the ingenious explanations of Ya'qūb's alleged "Sīstānī nationalism"²⁰ or "Persian national pride;"²¹ yet no one seems to have explored the many, repeated statements in the most important histories of the time that Ya'qūb was a warrior with a religious cause.²²

In short, the scholarly secondary literature in general has, for various reasons, by and large accepted one particular, negative view of Ya'qūb found in certain late accounts. Thus, Ya'qūb suffered the same fate as did the 'ayyārs in general at the hands of modern historians. A sort of vicious circle has been at work here: Due to preconceptions, derived from a late and limited source-base, regarding the nature of 'ayyārs,²³ historians have from the first looked askance at Ya'qūb. Their negative view of Ya'qūb, in turn, served to reinforce historical misconceptions regarding the early 'ayyārs. But this negative view of Ya'qūb is, as we shall see, inherently problematic. For when one examines our primary sources with an historiographical eye, he notices immediately that the primary sources upon which the negative view of Ya'qūb relies have an ingrained bias against the Ṣaffārids. Indeed, previous researchers have already noted the anti-Ṣaffārid bias of some of these materials,²⁴ yet they have still read the sources as though this awareness did not exist.

¹⁹ B. Lewis, "The Significance of Heresy in the History of Islam," *Studia Islamica* 1 (1953), p. 44.

²⁰ See M. Bāstānī-Pārīzī, *Ya'qūb-i Layth*; and C. E. Bosworth, *The History of the Ṣaffārids of Sīstān*.

²¹ S. M. Stern, "Ya'qūb the Coppersmith and Persian National Sentiment," p. 545, claims that Ya'qūb had "adopted the ideology of Persian national restoration," and speaks of "the strength of Persian national sentiment."

²² Bosworth even goes so far as to state that "The early Ṣaffārids seem personally to have had no strong religious feeling." (Bosworth, *The Ṣaffārids of Sīstān*, p. 15.)

²³ For other reasons for this bias, *vide infra*, chapter 8 and Conclusions.

²⁴ Bosworth explicitly remarked "the hostility of almost all the ... sources," (Bosworth, *Sīstān Under the Arabs*, p. 111; also *idem.*, "The Ṭāhirids and Ṣaffārids," *The Cambridge History of Iran. Volume IV. From the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs*, ed. R. N. Frye, Cambridge, 1975, p. 107: "It has not been easy to form a balanced picture of the early Ṣaffārids and their achievements. The standard historical sources on the eastern Iranian world ... are generally hostile to them") yet, inexplicably, failed to factor this animosity into his historical analysis. In fact, in a circular argument he adduces the hostility in some of the sources as further evidence of the fact that Ya'qūb must have been at best areligious and at worst heretical. Even Nöldeke, with his limited source base, noted that the sources were riddled with

In fact, as stated above, there are essentially two alternative and diametrically opposed views of Ya'qūb to be found in the primary sources: one, which we have just seen, that he was a religiously suspect rascal; the other, that he was a volunteer warrior for Sunni orthodoxy – a *mutatawwi'*. It is with this latter view that we shall concern ourselves here. Scholars, even while suspecting the veracity of the violently anti-Ya'qūb portrayal, reacted by merely toning down that view, without, apparently, realizing that the wildly divergent statements about him were irreconcilable and that there were, therefore, essentially two alternative, discrete depictions being presented. As a result, no one has yet weighed the alternative depiction of Ya'qūb as a volunteer Sunni holy warrior, or conducted a source-critical analysis to try to determine who had a motive for portraying Ya'qūb in a particular manner – or, on the most elementary level, even evaluated the provenance, reliability and chronology of the sources.

When one does conduct such an analysis, one realizes that the aversion to the Ṣaffārids had a political origin arising from several factors, the first of which is the 'Abbāsīd attitude toward the Ṣaffārids. In 262/875f. Ya'qūb marched on the Caliph al-Mu'tamid, blatantly challenging the latter's power; and the historians inform us that the caliph subsequently took extraordinary measures to blacken Ya'qūb's reputation, in particular his religious credentials.²⁵ An even more important factor, though, in the historiographical treatment of the Ṣaffārids was the Sāmānīd attitude. This latter dynasty became known in the subsequent Islamic historical tradition as the archetypal Sunni Persian dynasty. Conveniently enough, much of the Persian historiographical tradition was created under their rule.²⁶ Since many of the histories we have today, particularly the Persian ones, were written either during or after Sāmānīd times, they are filtered through Sāmānīd lenses. It has recently been suggested, in fact, that the Sāmānīds consciously fostered Persian historical writing specifically in order to provide themselves with legitimacy through propagandizing history.²⁷

contradictions, without however elaborating further. Barthold (*Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, p. 225) has observed that "The sympathy of the historians from whom we derive our information on the struggle between the Sāmānīds and the Ṣaffārids is unquestionably on the side of the first." Again, despite having noted this bias, Barthold fails to realize its implications for the reliability of these writers' depictions of the Ṣaffārids.

²⁵ According to Ṭabaṛī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 9, pp. 518-519, the Caliph actually went to the trouble of having a missive composed and read out to the general public, in which Ya'qūb was condemned and, among other things, charged with flying pennants bearing crosses (this, of course, was an accusation designed in order to impugn Ya'qūb's religious reputation). This was an unusual step for a caliph to take, and suggests that Ya'qūb undermined the caliph's legitimacy in a way that mere rebels did not.

²⁶ See E. G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, Cambridge, 1964, vol. 1, pp. 355-358.

²⁷ In the words of Julie Scott Meisami, to lend "support to the Sāmānīds' ... legitimizing enterprise." (J. S. Meisami, "Why write history in Persian? Historical writing in the Sāmānīd period," *Studies in Honour of Clifford Edmund Bosworth Volume II. The Sultan's Turret: Studies in Persian and Turkish Culture*, ed. Carole Hillenbrand, Leiden, 2000, p. 358).

It is this author's contention that since the Sāmānids were competing with the Ṣaffārids on the same grounds (*ghāzī* Sunni²⁸ Islam), and essentially usurped the latter's realm, they sought to blacken the Ṣaffārids' name in order to boost their own legitimacy.²⁹ This contention finds support in the fact that the Persian sources, with the sole exception of the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, are uniformly more hostile toward the Ṣaffārids than are the Arabic ones. This is true both for earlier works of the ninth and tenth centuries (for instance Gardīzī versus Ya'qūbī or Ibn Ḥawqal) and for later, post-eleventh-century ones (compare especially Ibn al-Athīr as opposed to Jūzjānī). Interestingly, while both earlier and later Persian sources have preserved much positive material on the Ṣaffārids, the later sources adopt overall a far more detractory tone.

One likely explanation for this phenomenon is that during Sāmānid times themselves events were too recent for contemporary historians to be able to distort those events. If Ya'qūb really was a very popular devout *mutaṭawwī'*, or holy warrior figure, people in Gardīzī's or Bal'amī's time would very probably still remember for what he had stood. His name could therefore never be so thoroughly blackened as the Sāmānids might have wished. Indeed, this is quite possibly the reason why Bal'amī's history, which was composed in the Sāmānid court during the tenth century, is completely silent on the subject of Ya'qūb: he had nothing bad to say about the Ṣaffārids, and therefore refrained from saying anything about them at all in order not to displease his Sāmānid master.³⁰ 'Abbāsīd and Sāmānid hostility to the Ṣaffārids, in these cases, led to their complete omission from these works.³¹

²⁸ The author here accepts Juynboll's premise (G. Juynboll, "Some new ideas on the development of *Sunna* as a technical term in early Islam," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 10 [1987], p. 117) that by the 220s/late 830s or early 840s "*sunna* comes to stand for 'orthodoxy,' never to acquire another nuance again." Melchert, as well, holds that "Sunni orthodoxy crystallized in the third Islamic century/ninth century CE. At the center of the new orthodoxy lay the Traditionalist creed of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and his followers ..." Christopher Melchert, "Sectaries in the Six Books: Evidence for Their Exclusion from the Sunni Community," *Muslim World*, 82:3-4 (1992), p. 287. See also J. Fück, "Die Rolle des Traditionalismus im Islam," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 93 (1939), pp. 1-32.

²⁹ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 254, says of the Sāmānid ruler who was the al-Manṣūr, as it were, of the Sāmānid dynasty, having both established Sāmānid power and laid the ideological foundations of the dynasty: "Ismā'īl was a *ghāzī*, and all of his army, likewise, were such men as day and night said their prayers and read the Qur'ān."

³⁰ Abū 'Alī Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Bal'amī, *Tārīkh nāmāh-i Ṭabarī*, ed. Muḥammad Rawshān, Tehran, 1366/1987, vol. 2, pp. 1284-1295. Bal'amī was actually a minister at the Sāmānid court of Manṣūr I, and undertook his "translation" of Ṭabarī at the express command of his lord (E. G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, vol. 1, pp. 368-369). This political sensitivity is probable the reason for his terse overall treatment of the later period covered by Ṭabarī.

³¹ The *Tārīkh-i Bukhārā*, for instance, includes only the briefest mention of Ya'qūb, under its Sāmānid section, describing him as a rebel – but then contradicting itself in the very next paragraph when it makes clear that the *khubṭa* was said in his name by right, and admits

When one does begin to examine the historical portrayal of the Ṣaffārīds in a source-critical fashion, one immediately notices that the sources closest to this time, as well as those known to have incorporated early sources stemming from the pre-Mongol era,³² all seem to use the word *‘ayyār* as a fungible term for *mutatawwi‘* or *ghāzī*; that is, a warrior fighting for orthodox Islam,³³ be it on the borders against infidels or within the body politic against heretical (in Sunni eyes) Khārījites and Shī‘ites. Moreover, as we shall soon see, the sources employ this interchangeability specifically in the context of Ya‘qūb’s career. We have already seen in the previous chapter that there was an active and vital *mutatawwi‘* tradition with the most unimpeachable Sunni credentials; we shall soon discover as well that the Ṣaffārīds had close and intimate connections with religious scholars who were, both in terms of their religious pedigree and their behaviour, direct descendants of that proud tradition.

Perhaps most important, once we understand that the word *‘ayyār* meant at this time essentially *ghāzī* or holy warrior, Ya‘qūb’s career no longer appears as a disorganized and somewhat haphazard series of seemingly unconnected campaigns, but rather falls into place logically as a determined and coherent string of military activities in service of the faith. This becomes most apparent if one examines Ya‘qūb’s doings chronologically in order to determine which issues most pre-occupied him at particular times. One immediately perceives that, far from being a freebooter whose “dominant motive ... in addition to ... hatred of the ‘Abbāsids, seems to have been a sheer love of military conquest,”³⁴ Ya‘qūb began his career fighting the Khārījites in Sīstān, then he was slowly but inexorably drawn into *mutatawwi‘* activities in adjacent provinces as well. Ya‘qūb was, in other words, untiringly and unceasingly devoting himself to the ideals of the Sunni *mutatawwi‘* tradition we have detailed above.³⁵

that the Sāmānīds did not receive Caliphal appointment to the city until after the Caliphal-Ṣaffārīd break in 262 (pp. 108, 109). It also mistakenly refers to al-Muwaffaq, in a Freudian slip, as the caliph.

³² E. g. Ibn al-Athīr’s use of al-Sallāmī’s lost *Ta’rīkh wulāt Kburāsān*. See W. Barthold’s discussion of the subject, “Zur Geschichte der Ṣaffārīden,” pp. 174-175.

³³ Sourdel has defined “orthodox” Islam during the early ninth century as follows: “Cependant se développait ... un mouvement rigoriste de défense de l’orthodoxie qui n’admettait aucune compromission, ni avec les méthodes de la philosophie grecque ni avec les prétensions des ‘Alīdes. Connu surtout pour avoir condamné, au contraire de la doctrine mu‘tazilite, la thèse de la ‘création’ du Coran, il avait été soutenu notamment par l’imam Ibn Ḥanbal ... et se présentait comme le mouvement ‘grandissant,’ qui défendait la mémoire de Mu‘awiya contre ‘Ali ...” (“La politique religieuse des successeurs d’al-Mutawakkil,” *Studia Islamica* 13 [1960]). One should add, of course, that it championed the reliance upon Prophetic tradition in place of the process of logical deduction favoured by the rationalist party, particularly the Mu‘tazilites and section of the Ḥanīfites; see Melchert, “Religious Policies of the Caliphs,” pp. 317-318.

³⁴ Bosworth, “The Armies of the Ṣaffārīds,” p. 536.

³⁵ See *supra* Chapter 2.

Ya‘qūb appeared upon the *ghāzī* scene at a crucial moment; immediately prior to and during the period of the rise of the Ṣaffārīds, the emerging Traditionist version of Islam which we have come to characterize as orthodox (best symbolized by the figure of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal) was in sore need of a champion. The most obvious area of Islamic political weakness was in the Caliphate, which was now entering a period of “*fainéance* of the caliphal office and disintegration of the caliphal state.”³⁶

Moreover, the political state of those lands still within the caliphal orbit was disturbed; at the time of Hārūn’s death the entire East was aflame with the revolt of Rāfi‘ b. al-Layth,³⁷ followed by unrest, revolts and civil wars under his three sons al-Amīn, al-Ma‘mūn, and al-Mu‘taṣim, who held the caliphal office successively.³⁸ This last-named caliph, who removed to the new military city Sāmarrā’, was in fact the last ‘Abbāsīd for many years to come who possessed any semblance of control over the now ubiquitous Turkish slave troops and generals. Under al-Wāthiq and al-Mutawakkil, caliphal power continued its downward spiral, and from the time of al-Mutawakkil’s assassination until the reign of al-Mu‘taḍid, the caliphs were mere cyphers.

The crumbling of the caliphate found its ultimate expression, of course, in the successive depositions and murders of a series of caliphs, beginning with al-Mutawakkil in 247/861.³⁹ “He and his three successors, al-Musta‘in, al-Mu‘tazz,

³⁶ P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity*, Cambridge, 1980, p. 82. Although the loss of territorial integrity was a drawn-out process; since the time of Hārūn the caliphate had been slowly breaking up. Sourdél has already noted that under Hārūn “The distant Maghrib had become completely detached from the ‘Abbāsīd empire.” It was soon to be followed by the province of Ifrīqiya, which Hārūn basically alienated to the hereditary government of the Aghlabīds; “The ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate,” *The Cambridge History of Islam*, Vol. 1a, ed. P. M. Holt et al., Cambridge, 1995, pp. 117-118

³⁷ Mottahedeh, “The ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate in Iran,” p. 71; E. Daniel, *The Political and Social History of Khurāsān under ‘Abbasid Rule 747-820*, Chicago, 1979, pp. 170 – 175; on previous religious unrest and revolts during Hārūn’s reign see M. Rekaya, “Le *Hurram-Din* et les mouvements *Hurramites* sous les ‘Abbāsīdes: Réapparition du mazdakeïsme ou manifestation de ghulāt musulmanes dans l’ex-empire sasanide au VIII et IXe siècles après J. C.” *Studia Islamica* 60 (1984), pp. 35-38.

³⁸ Indeed, it has been said of this third son that “there were revolts against [him] almost everywhere.” Osman Ismail, “The founding of a new capital: Sāmarrā’,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 31:1 (1968), p. 4. Al-Amīn, of course, was violently overthrown by the Khurāsānī armies of his brother al-Ma‘mūn. For the serious revolt of Babak, which lasted virtually throughout the entire reign of al-Ma‘mūn and included the defeat of numerous caliphal armies, see Mottahedeh, “The ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate,” p. 75; Rekaya, “Le *Hurram-din*,” pp. 38-47, and Sadighī’s lengthy chapter on the revolt, *Les Mouvements religieux iraniens au IIe et au IIIe siècle de l’égire*, Paris, 1938, pp. 229-280. Mu‘taṣim’s reign witnessed the serious revolt led by Mazyār; *vide* M. Rekaya, “Mazyar: Résistance ou intégration d’une province Iranienne au monde Musulmane au milieu du IXe siècle ap. J. C.” *Studia Iranica* 2:2 (1973) pp. 143-192. There were also two major messianic Sufyānīd revolts, in 810 and 841; see R. Hartmann, “Der Sufyānī,” *Studia Orientalia Ioanni Pedersen Dedicata*, Copenhagen, 1953, pp. 141-151.

³⁹ For the murder of al-Mutawakkil, see Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 95-100.

and al-Muhtadī, reigned in all only about nine years, and the three last were all in turn done to death, generally with circumstances of great brutality, by the Turks, who were now paramount.⁴⁰ Yet even more crippling than the murders and depositions was the caliphs' powerlessness in the hands of their own officers;⁴¹ quite simply, they were so completely neutralized that they were no longer able to fulfil their function of protecting Islam and enforcing God's will on earth, and no one else was taking up the slack. Furthermore, the infighting between contending Turkish factions led to great public disorder, including several *fitnas* in Baghdad and Sāmarrā'.⁴²

For someone with strict traditionalist convictions, however, caliphal weakness may have been something of a boon during this period; for from the time of al-Ma'mūn onward there was also the problem of Caliphal attitude toward non-orthodox belief. While al-Mutawakkil himself espoused certain positions dear to hardline Sunnis – he abolished the *miḥna*, was ardently anti-Shī'ite and actively anti-dhimmi⁴³ – it has been noted that he was “hardly a sponsor of traditionalism. At most, rather, it was his policy to promote a moderate rationalism.”⁴⁴ This is a position which would have been anathema to the rigorist *abl al-ḥadīth*, who would not have been pleased with al-Mutawakkil's appointments to the religious courts either.⁴⁵

Moreover, it has been shown that all of al-Mutawakkil's successors down to the time of al-Mu'taḍid were of this same bent, with the sole exception of al-Muhtadī, who was an outright Qur'ānic creationist.⁴⁶ Equally bad (from the or-

⁴⁰ E. G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, vol. I, p. 345. For the deposition of Musta'in see Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 167 (an account of his murder can be found on pp. 172-173).

⁴¹ See Sourdel, “La politique religieuse des successeurs d'al-Mutawakkil,” p. 5.

⁴² See e. g. Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 139; 173 (which involved a *fitna* between the Turks and the North African troops [*maghāribā*]); Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 9, pp. 392-393, and so forth.

⁴³ For his commendable intolerance of infidels and heterodoxy see e. g. Ibn Isfandiyyār, *Tārikh-i Ṭabarīstan*, p. 224; Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 9, pp. 171-174 for his anti-*dhimmī* regulations; on his destruction of the grave of al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, see *ibid.* p. 185; on his anti-Mu'tazilite activities see *ibid.* pp. 190-191. It should be emphasized, however, in regard to the creationist controversy, that “the caliph's point was not to affirm traditionalist orthodoxy, that the Qur'an was increate, but rather to quieten the whole controversy,” Melchert, “Religious Policies of the Caliphs from al-Mutawakkil to al-Muqtadir, A. H. 232-295/A. D. 847-908,” *Islamic Law and Society* 3:3 (1996), p. 322. This lukewarm attitude must have provided scant satisfaction to the orthodox; and, indeed, there are several indications that Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, for one, was not very happy with this caliph (Melchert, *ibid.* pp. 326-327).

⁴⁴ Melchert, *ibid.* p. 318.

⁴⁵ Melchert, “Religious Policies,” pp. 328-329.

⁴⁶ Melchert, “Religious Policies,” pp. 318-320; 336. There is an entire chapter on the *Jabmiyya* in Sulaymān b. al-Ash'ath Abū Dā'ūd al-Sijistānī's *Masā'il al-Imām Aḥmad*, Cairo, 1420/1999, pp. 353 – 363. Its general tenor can be gathered from the following tradition: “I said to Aḥmad [b. Ḥanbal]: ‘Is someone who says “The Qur'an is created” an infidel?’

thodox point of view), the caliphs al-Muntaṣir and probably also al-Mustaʿin harboured pro-ʿAlid sympathies, according to some modern scholarship, much in the fashion of the earlier, pro-Muʿtazilite caliphs, such as al-Maʿmūn, of the early ninth century.⁴⁷ Thus, those who adhered to the more traditionalist schools must have felt a certain amount of alienation from a series of successive caliphs, largely politically impotent though the latter may have been.

For someone of ardently Sunni religious persuasions, of course, one crucial aspect of caliphal dysfunction was that the central authorities were, at best, unenthusiastic regarding militant Islam, particularly independent *ghāzī* raids. Worse, “the ʿAbbāsīd Caliphate ... was rather on the defensive in those parts of the empire which were directly under the rule of the Caliph, i. e. in ʿIrāq, Syria, Armenia and Egypt.”⁴⁸ The waning Islamic militancy of the government not only resulted in great, heretical revolts (such as Bābak’s and Mazyār’s), but also emboldened the neighbouring infidels outside of the Dār al-Islām, who, encouraged also by the growing political weakness of the central government, seized the military initiative on the borders.⁴⁹ Furthermore, whereas during the reign of al-Muʿtaṣim Byzantine incursions would incur reprisals, officially directed and planned by the caliph (see for instance the Byzantine raid of 223/838 and Muʿtaṣim’s energetic and aggressive response to it),⁵⁰ already by the time of al-Mutawakkil this was no longer so.⁵¹ In fact, we find the border campaigns being led almost entirely by private *ghāzīs*,⁵² and the Byzantines striking back hard at the Muslims.⁵³

He replied: ‘I say he is an infidel [*kāfir*].’” (*ibid.* p. 353) ʿAbdallāh b. al-Mubārak is reported to have said: “Verily, let us relate the words of the Jews and Christians, but let us not be capable of relating the words of the *Jahmiyya*.” (al-Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, vol. 8, p. 401).

⁴⁷ See Sourdel, “La politique religieuse,” pp. 8-11. This claim is, however, disputed by Melchert (“Religious Policies,” pp. 330-331).

⁴⁸ Ismail, “Sāmarrāʾ,” p. 10.

⁴⁹ For instance, in the year 241/855f Egypt was raided by Christian Nubians; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 77; Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, vol. 9, pp. 203-206.

⁵⁰ Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, vol. 9, p. 55 and pp. 56-71 respectively.

⁵¹ See e. g. the enormous Byzantine attack of 238/852f (Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, vol. 9, pp. 193-195), which caused great damage but was not responded to at all, at least by the authorities (one jailed patriotic Muslim did break his bonds, gather some fighters and kill some Byzantines, but this was by no means a coordinated – and certainly not a governmentally sponsored – reprisal).

⁵² See for instance the raids of several Muslim *ghāzīs* in 246/860 (Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, vol. 9, p. 219); these *mutatawwiʿa* appear to be trying to compensate for Muslim weakness at the center. The major exception was Waṣīf’s *ṣāʿifa* campaign of 248/862f (Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, vol. 9, pp. 240-244) which was, however, ordered by al-Muntaṣir not for religious purposes, but rather in order get Waṣīf out of the way and detached from his supporters in the army camps (this is stated outright by Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, vol. 9, p. 240). The sole exception to this general lack of caliphal involvement in *ghāzī* activities seems to have been the summer raids led by Balkājūr, a Turkish general who was active at the same time that ʿAlī b. Yaḥyā al-Armanī, one of the famous *ghāzīs* of the time, was carrying out his activities (See Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 89, 93), during the 240s and 250s/850s and 860s. It seems, however, that his job was designed more for public show than for serious raiding activity. This

The sources depict a definite sense of frustration among the Muslim populace at the several defeats of Muslim border raids in these middle years of the ninth century,⁵⁴ the most stinging of which occurred in 249/863 when a coordinated Byzantine effort trounced the Muslims and killed several very prominent *ghāzīs*. As a result of this particular defeat, the outraged populace rioted in Baghdād:

When news concerning the death of ‘Umar b. ‘Ubayd Allāh al-Aqṭa’ and ‘Ali b. Yaḥyā al-Armanī reached the people of Baghdād, Sāmarrā’ and the rest of the nearby Muslim cities – the two were strong defenders of Islam, men of great courage who elicited enormous praise along the frontier districts they served – people became exceedingly distressed. Their hearts were heavy, especially because one had died so quickly after the other. Moreover, they had already been appalled by al-Mutawakkil’s death at the hands of the Turks and by the way [in which] the latter assumed control over the affairs of the Muslims. The Turks killed any caliph they desired to kill and appointed in his stead whomever they wished, without reference to the religious authorities and without eliciting the opinion of the Muslims. The populace (*al-‘amma*) of Baghdād gathered, shouted out in protest and called for action ...

At that time, the wealthy people of Baghdād and Sāmarrā’ spent great amounts of their money to supply those setting out for the frontiers to fight the Byzantines. Masses of people came forward from al-Jabal, Fārs, al-Ahwāz and other districts in order to participate in the raids against the Byzantines. We received no information that the central authorities were prepared to send a military force against the Byzantines on their own account in those days, despite the actions of the latter against the Muslims.⁵⁵

In short, the government was perceived as failing in one of its primary religious obligations; and private citizens were obviously not successful in taking up the burden.⁵⁶

Furthermore, not only infidels, but also non-Sunni versions of Islam were flourishing. The Shī‘ites were engaged in active unrest – in 250/864 there was a

view finds support in two salient facts: first, his summer campaigns do not seem to have accomplished much; and, second, the fact that we find him involved in political activity rather than raiding after the death of ‘Ali b. Yaḥyā. A good case in point is Balkājūr’s excursion to the *thughūr* in 251/865, not primarily in order to raid (although he is said to have conquered “a cave” [*matmūra*] and to have returned with much booty and a group of Byzantine prisoners; see Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 164), but rather to coerce the citizenry to switch their allegiance from al-Musta‘īn to al-Mu‘tazz; see Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 149.

⁵³ Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 9, pp. 207, 261; Mutawakkil does in the former case send his general – in 244 – to avenge the damage the Byzantines inflicted (p. 210), but, again, this raid does not seem to have accomplished much.

⁵⁴ See e. g. the failed raid of 253/867 related in Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-Islām*, vol. 19, p. 11, in which many of the Muslim participants are captured or killed.

⁵⁵ Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 9, p. 262; tr. George Saliba, *The Crisis of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate*, pp. 10–11. On al-Armanī and his death see also al-Ya‘qūbi, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 2, p. 496.

⁵⁶ See e. g. the raid of 253, when Muḥammad b. Mu‘adh led a *ghazw* in area of Malatya, was beaten and imprisoned (Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 183).

major Zaydī revolt in Kūfa,⁵⁷ followed closely by the ascendance of al-Ḥasan b. Zayd in Ṭabaristān.⁵⁸ As the 250s/860s progressed, the situation with the Zaydīs became ever more grave. In 250/864 the Zaydīs had taken over the major city of Rayy after beating a caliphal army;⁵⁹ although the Ṭāhirids succeeded the following year in driving the Zaydīs out of Rayy,⁶⁰ the very next year the latter returned to attack the city, killing and taking prisoners; they left only upon the payment of a danegeld of 1,000,000 dirhams.⁶¹ Simultaneously, another ‘Alid revolt was taking place in Qazvīn, adjacent to the Caspian areas.⁶² To put the finishing touch on all this turmoil, the caliphate was at that time embroiled in a fierce civil war, after the Turks had deposed al-Musta‘īn and appointed al-Mu‘tazz as caliph in his place. Al-Musta‘īn, however, had managed to flee to Baghdād, where he received the strong support of most other groups – the *abnā’*, the Ṭāhirid ruler, and many others.⁶³ The situation deteriorated still further when yet another series of ‘Alid revolts occurred: one again in Kūfa,⁶⁴ another in Mecca,⁶⁵ and a third in Qazvīn and Zanjān; the Qazvīnī revolt succeeded in expelling the Ṭāhirids from the area.⁶⁶

The most long-lasting and threatening heterodox revolt, however, was undoubtedly that of the Zanj, the black slaves of the ‘Irāqī salt marshes, which came very close to – and whose declared aim was – annihilating the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate.⁶⁷ This uprising, which began in 255/869 and ended only in 270/883f, saw at

⁵⁷ Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 9, pp. 266-269; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 126-130; Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, vol. 5, pp. 61-62; this last author, however, is not sure whether the revolt occurred in 250/864 or 248/862.

⁵⁸ For the beginnings of his rise, see Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 130-134; Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 9, pp. 271-276; Ibn Isfandiyār, *Tārikh-i Ṭabaristān*, pp. 224-245; Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, vol. 5, p. 66. According to Ṭabarī, al-Ḥasan found such a warm welcome in Ṭabaristān due to widespread hatred of the brutality and misrule of the Ṭāhirid provincial governor, Sulaymān b. ‘Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir, and his cronies. (p. 261)

⁵⁹ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 134; Mas‘ūdī, vol. 5, p. 67. On the defeat of the army see Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 9, p. 265.

⁶⁰ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 163.

⁶¹ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 177; 2,000,000 according to Ṭabarī (*Ta’rīkh*, vol. 9, p. 372). See also George Miles, *The Numismatic History of Rayy. Numismatic Studies No. 2*, New York, 1938, pp. 129-130.

⁶² Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj*, vol. 5, p. 67.

⁶³ On the civil war see Ṭabarī, the entire entry for the year 251/865f; civil disorder continued under al-Mu‘tazz – see al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 2, p. 502. On the *abnā’*, see P. Crone, “‘Abbāsīd *Abnā’* and Sassanid Cavalrymen,” *passim*. There had also been tensions between the Turks and the *abnā’* regarding al-Musta‘īn’s appointment as well; see al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 2, p. 494.

⁶⁴ Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 9, pp. 328-329; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 164-165; Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, vol. 5, pp. 67-68.

⁶⁵ Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 9, pp. 346-347; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 165-166.

⁶⁶ Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 9, p. 346. The timing of the Qazvīnī revolt is somewhat unclear – it may be identical to the one cited *supra*.

⁶⁷ Although according to Mas‘ūdī the opinions of the leader were Khārijite rather than ‘Alid (*Murūj*, vol. 5, p. 103); he claims that they used the characteristic Khārijite cry, “*la ḥukma*

various times the lion's share of the province of 'Irāq and parts of Khūzistān, including the major cities of Baṣra, Wāsiṭ and al-Ahwāz, under rebel control.⁶⁸

The aftermath of the civil war over the deposition of al-Musta'in in the early 250s/860s was also marked by widespread disorders on the part of the army, who engaged in looting, pillage, infighting, and outright rioting.⁶⁹ Positions were bought and sold by bribes to the Caliph's Turkish handlers.⁷⁰ Shortly thereafter, in 253/867, a serious Khārijite revolt began in the Jazīra, and the Turkish general sent to put it down was instead killed by the rebels.⁷¹ This revolt proved in the end a long-drawn out affair, and debilitating for both the caliphal and Ṭāhirid reputations: "[Musāwir] defied the government, such as it was, for a decade."⁷²

This was, in fact, not the first Khārijite revolt in the Jazīra during these troubled years; already in 248/862f. a man named Muḥammad b. 'Amr al-Shārī had rebelled in the Mawṣil area.⁷³ But by the time of Musāwir's revolt the frequency of the various heterodox revolts, together with their increasing success, must have been viewed by Sunnis with positive alarm. By 253/867 Musāwir had defeated yet another Caliphal army.⁷⁴ It is perhaps not coincidental that this is the same year in which Ibn al-Athīr begins his account of the Ṣaffārid dynasty, and in which the Ṣaffārids begin to intervene in Ṭāhirid dominions in which Khārijites were active.⁷⁵ Ya'qūb was preoccupied with Khārijites, and as we shall soon see spent much of his career, particularly his early career in Sīstān, fighting them.

Obviously, all of the above-mentioned ailments of the Islamic body politic – civil wars, 'Alid and Khārijite revolts, incursions by Infidels, unruly behaviour on

illā li'llāb" (for the association of this phrase with the Khārijites, see G. R. Hawting, "The significance of the slogan *lā bukm illā li'llāb* and the references to the *hudūd* in the traditions about the fitna and the murder of 'Uthmān," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41 (1978), pp. 453 – 463).

⁶⁸ See A. Popovic, *La révolte des esclaves en Iraq au IIIe/IXe siècle*, particularly chapters 3 and 4, on the actual course of the fighting and the military achievements of the rebels. Apparently, more extreme Shi'ite groups were also becoming active from the time of Mu'tamid; see Massignon's somewhat alarmist article, "Recherches sur les Shi'ites extrémistes à Bagdad à la fin du troisième siècle de l'Hégire," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 92 (1938), N. F. 17, pp. 378 – 382, which, though exaggerated in its estimate, does nevertheless make a valid point.

⁶⁹ Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 9, pp. 353-354; 356-360; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 173-174.

⁷⁰ Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 9, p. 372.

⁷¹ Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 9, pp. 374-376; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 174; 179-180. For Khārijite revolts during the third/ninth century, see L. Veccia Vaglieri, "Le Vicende del Haragismo in Epoca Abbaside," *Revista degli Studia Orientali* 24 (1949), pp. 31-44, *passim*, but especially pp. 41, 43.

⁷² W. Thomson, "Kharijism and the Khārijites," *The MacDonald Presentation Volume: A Tribute to Duncan Black MacDonald*, Princeton, 1933, p. 379.

⁷³ Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 9, p. 255; it seems that this man was not finally killed until 252/866 (Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 176), although he is also reported as having been killed and crucified under the year of his rebellion (Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 160).

⁷⁴ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 184; Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dbahab*, vol. 5, pp. 94-95.

⁷⁵ See *infra*.

the part of governmental troops – can also be found in other periods. What is unique to this time is how concentrated and severe all of these problems were; their magnitude and combination, occurring simultaneously and in conjunction with growing political weakness at the center, and coupled with the general perception that the caliph was not free and that anarchy reigned at the heart of government, was both quantitatively and qualitatively different from everything that had come before since the ‘Abbāsīd revolution.⁷⁶

This rising tide of ills – particularly caliphal and Ṭāhirid weakness in the face of the Musāwir rebellion and ‘Alid activities – must surely have alarmed all pious Muslims, including the militantly Sunni *Mutaṭawwi‘a*. If Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth did indeed belong to that group, as we are positing, then these social, religious, political, and military ills go a long way towards explaining why Ya‘qūb began to be active outside Sistān and the border marches where and when he did. Ya‘qūb’s career, as we shall see, demonstrates that he was not the man to let Khārijites and ‘Alids operate unchecked. Moreover, we must always keep in mind that the rise of the Ṣaffārīds was simply a more spectacularly successful example of a process that was transpiring all over the Islamic empire as a result of the disintegration of caliphal power: “The collapse of the ‘Abbāsīd government ... forced many local Islamic communities to work out ways of dealing with the near anarchy which accompanied this collapse.”⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Notwithstanding Ṭayyib al-Ḥibri’s attempt to interpret the post-Mutawakkil events as some kind of literary construction (*Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hārūn al-Rasīd and the Narrative of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate*, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 208-215), it is difficult indeed to avoid characterizing the Sāmarrā’ period as “the abyss of political chaos and financial breakdown ...”, as indeed he himself does (*ibid.*, p. 214). In the present writer’s judgment, although it is certainly helpful to try to reconstruct the possible biases of the sources, it is doubtful that the authors of those sources were consciously striving for literary effect and symmetry to the extent that they actually falsified historical occurrences on a truly grand scale. There is a fundamental fallacy in attempting to apply modern French theories of literary criticism to medieval historical writing, however tendentious that writing may be, which is, quite simply, that those who consciously see themselves as attempting to write history cannot be equated with or compared to avowed writers of fiction, because there is an underlying framework of empirical fact to which they must more or less adhere. In other words, al-Mutawakkil was indeed murdered, and there were in reality Turkish commanders who exercised a great deal of power at this time; unfortunately it seems as though al-Ḥibri assumes a priori that any negative report about the behaviour of the foreign Turkish soldiery must be false. That is, he assumes, with no empirical basis for doing so, that the Turks must be receiving unwarranted negative treatment in the sources solely because of all the nasty traditions about and prejudice against them, rather than exploring the possibility that they did indeed contribute materially to the destruction of the early Islamic caliphate and that the negative treatment and apocalyptic traditions (which latter Ḥibri almost completely omits, incidentally) arose *as a result* of their destructive social role at this time.

⁷⁷ R. Mottahedeh, “Administration in Būyid Qazwīn,” D. S. Richards, ed., *Islamic Civilisation 950-1150*, p. 33. Mottahedeh is referring the early fourth century A. H. rather than the mid-third; but the description is even more apposite for the earlier period, when the political disorder was both unprecedented and more glaring.

The place that witnessed the most Khārijite activity during the years of ʿAbbāsīd weakness was undoubtedly Sīstān. As we have already seen,⁷⁸ the Khārijites had long been active in Sīstān. Trouble erupted again in Sīstān due to the appeasement-oriented policies of the Sīstānī governor appointed in 230/844f, Ibrāhīm b. Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad b. Bashīr b. Saʿīd al-Qūṣī. We are told of him that he was “conflict-averse; he never warred upon the Khārijites and agreed with everyone, so that the Khārijites grew in power during his reign.”⁷⁹ It was possibly for this reason – Ibrāhīm’s tolerance of Khārijites, and the general problem of the government’s not taking action against them – that several revolts began against Ibrāhīm’s governor in Bust, either in that year or the following one (231/845f); first, one led by Ghassān b. Naṣr (whose brother, at any rate, was an ʿ*ayyār*);⁸⁰ subsequently,

... another man from Bust revolted, called Aḥmad Qawlī. And the ʿ*ayyārs* and heroes [*mardān-i mard*] gathered to him – those from Bust and from Sīstān – and made war upon Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Qūṣī [son of the governor Ibrāhīm al-Qūṣī], but Aḥmad Qawlī was defeated.⁸¹

Of course, another possible cause of these revolts could have been simple misrule, particularly given the sequel: “Ibrāhīm recalled his son from Bust and sent Yaḥyā b. ʿAmr there ... and he treated the people kindly, so that they were quiet towards him [*ārām giriftand*],” thus implying that they had previously been unquiet due to poor behaviour on the part of the governor. In any case, Ibrāhīm al-Qūṣī soon made the error of sending his unpopular son back to Bust, where he was promptly ejected by a man named Bashshār b. Sulaymān, who behaved none too well himself. This Bashshār was then in turn defeated by a seemingly widespread revolt led by the ʿ*ayyār* brother of our first insurrectionist, Ghassān b. Naṣr:

Then Ṣāliḥ b. Naṣr – the brother of Ghassān b. Naṣr b. Mālik – revolted in Bust; many people gathered to him from Sīstān and Bust, and Yaʿqūb b. al-Layth and the ʿ*ayyārs* of Sīstān strengthened him ... They killed Bashshār, and Bust and its environs submitted to Ṣāliḥ b. Naṣr.⁸²

Subsequent to this event, “Ṣāliḥ b. Naṣr became powerful in Bust, with regard to weapons, soldiers, treasure and men; but all of his military strength derived from Yaʿqūb b. al-Layth and the ʿ*ayyārs* of Sīstān.”⁸³ Note that it is now *all* of Ṣāliḥ’s strength, not just a portion of it, that comes from Yaʿqūb and his ʿ*ayyārs*.

⁷⁸ *Vide supra*, Chapter 2.

⁷⁹ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 190.

⁸⁰ Ghassān himself was quite probably a religiously motivated fighter as well; we are told that he was killed by the Khawārij, against whom, given his sibling’s track record, he may very well have been fighting (*Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 197).

⁸¹ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, pp. 191-192.

⁸² *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 192.

⁸³ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 193.

It is worth pausing here for a moment to ask ourselves: Who were these *‘ayyārs*? What was their aim and motivation? It would appear from our sources, both in their usage of the term and from the context, that in this period and place the word *‘ayyār* was virtually equivalent to the word *mutaṭawwi‘a*. That is, Sunni religious warriors fighting for the faith, apparently in organized bands; as it were, private, non-governmental brotherhoods of *ghāzīs*. The context supports this theory: the *‘ayyārs* first appear fighting the Khārijites, and are always subsequently seen battling either what from a Sunni point of view would be considered heresy (i. e. Khārijism, Shi‘ism), outright infidels or outrageously bad (what in Islamic legal parlance would be called “oppressive” – *zālim*) government; which last, moreover, inevitably involved encouragement of the first two elements as well.

It is important to understand that in Islamic thinking the elements just mentioned are complementary aspects of one goal: the establishment of God’s rule, the only legitimate rule, on earth, by force if necessary. Whereas Jihad is the struggle to impose God’s rule outside of the Dār al-Islām, its necessary complement is the imposition of God’s rule within the Dār al-Islām. This continual proper ordering of Islamic society itself is the duty known as *al-amr bi’l-ma‘rūf wa’l-nahy ‘an al-munkar* – the enjoining of good and forbidding of evil.⁸⁴ In short, the *‘ayyārs* and the *mutaṭawwi‘a* shared an identical function and goal: working towards the triumph through armed struggle of God’s rule on earth as interpreted by Sunni Islam, both within and outside of the borders of Islamdom; and, as we saw earlier and shall see again further on in this work, neither the *‘ayyārs* nor the *mutaṭawwi‘a* limited themselves to one or the other kind of pursuit to the exclusion of its complement. Both *‘ayyārān* and *mutaṭawwi‘a* engaged extensively in both *al-amr bi’l-ma‘rūf* and Jihad, no doubt viewing the two as one and the same activity.

More convincing, however, than the demonstrable equivalence of function is the specific equation of the two terms *‘ayyār* and *mutaṭawwi‘i* in many of our sources. Ibn al-Athīr makes this connection explicit on several occasions when writing of Ya‘qūb al-Ṣaffār and his brother ‘Amr, both of whom were, of course, *‘ayyārān*. Thus he states, for instance, when Ya‘qūb took control of the Sīstāni *‘ayyārs* from Dirham,⁸⁵ that he “became the one in charge of the *mutaṭawwi‘a*’s

⁸⁴ The inextricability of the two duties, *Jibād* and *al-amr bi’l-ma‘rūf*, has been noted by Michael Cook (*Commanding Right*, p. 490), who calls striking “the frequency with which the scholars yoke forbidding wrong to holy war,” noting that many *‘ulama’* subsume these two duties under the same category – for instance, “For Ibn Taymiyya, the ‘completion’ of *al-amr bi’l-ma‘rūf* is by *jibād*.” (*ibid.*, p. 491, n. 179)

⁸⁵ Who is described as “Dirham b. al-Ḥusayn, of the *mutaṭawwi‘a*,” Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 64. One of our earliest sources also refers to Dirham as “a man of the *Mutaṭawwi‘a*,” Abū ‘Abdallāh Ḥamza b. al-Ḥasan al-Iṣfahāni, *Ta’rīkh sinī mulūk al-arḍ wa’l-‘anbiyā’*; Beirut, 1961, p. 169. This source, according to the author (p. 172), was written in 351/962, during the Sāmānid period. ‘Abd al-Malik b. Nuḥ is named by al-Iṣfahāni as the

affairs” (*mutawallī amr al-mutaṭawwiʿa*).⁸⁶ Masʿūdī, too, writes that Yaʿqūb was a *mutaṭawwiʿ*, and also confirms that he was fighting the Khārijites:

We have already related in [Masʿūdī’s lost work] *Akbbār al-zamān* Yaʿqūb b. al-Layth’s beginnings in Sijistān; his being a coppersmith in his youth; his going out with the volunteer fighters [*mutaṭawwiʿa*] of Sijistān to fight the Khārijites [*ḥarb al-shurāt*]; his joining Dirham b. Naṣr; and his [attacking] Shādraq [? sic], the city of the Khārijites from among those bordering Sijistān ...⁸⁷

One of the more intriguing sources to draw this equivalency is Ibn Khallikān, whose account is on the whole extremely hostile toward the Ṣaffārids (in the very heading of his entry he accuses Yaʿqūb of being a Khārijite;⁸⁸ and even claims that Yaʿqūb carried banners with crosses on them in battle against the caliph⁸⁹), but who obviously lifted whole passages unchanged from earlier historians whose views of the Ṣaffārids were somewhat more positive:

Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb b. al-Layth al-Ṣaffār al-Khārijī:

Historians have already written many accounts of this man and of his brother ʿAmr, the countries which they ruled, the people whom they killed, and their battles with the Caliphs, so I have chosen from this [corpus] that which I have set down on these pages ... The beginning of his career [was] that he and his brother ʿAmr were coppersmiths in their youth, and they manifested asceticism [*al-zuhd*]. There was a man from among the

most recent ruler of Khurāsān. True to our theory, this source is very brief and carefully neutral in its description of the Ṣaffārids

⁸⁶ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 185.

⁸⁷ Masʿūdī, *Muruj*, vol. 5, p. 227. It is rather strange that if Yaʿqūb’s epithet “al-Ṣaffār” so clearly meant that he had previously been a coppersmith, Ibn Khallikān should feel it necessary in his biographical entry to write that “Yaʿqūb was called al-Ṣaffār because he used to work copper.” This raises the interesting question of whether the term “al-Ṣaffār” could possibly have meant anything else at the time – for instance, whether it could not have been some sort of religious designation. One’s doubt regarding the alleged copper-working meaning of the epithet is strengthened by other factors: 1) The fact that being a copper-smith or (as imputed to ʿAmr) a mule-driver was clearly meant to be highly denigrating; this can be seen from Ibn Khallikān’s story (*loc. cit.*) in which a Ṣaffārid partisan is asked what ʿAmr’s profession was, and refuses to answer. He reveals that ʿAmr had been a muleteer only after the latter’s death. 2) It is peculiar, if these professional affiliations are indeed accurate, that this was apparently not widely known at all – otherwise, why does anyone need to inquire? 3) There are too many ʿulamāʾ with the epithet “al-Ṣaffār” who crop up in the *ṭabaqāt* literature for the period of the third-fifth Islamic centuries – almost exclusively Ḥanbalite or Shāfiʿite, and frequently Sufi to boot; *vide e. g.* Abūʾl-Barakāt Kamāl al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad al-Anbārī, *Nuzhat al-alibbāʿfi ṭabaqāt al-udabāʿ*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Samarraʿī, Baghdad, 1970, pp. 217-218; Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, pp. 57, 77, 134, and so forth.

⁸⁸ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-aʿyān*, vol. 5, p. 345. The word could, of course, also mean rebel or, as Martin Hinds has shown (“Kufan Political Alignments,” p. 3), “one who goes out and acquires *sharaf* on his own account, without his having possessed a long-standing [*sharaf*].”

⁸⁹ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-aʿyān*, vol. 5, p. 358. This is the passage we mentioned *supra*. Note how closely it follows Ibn al-Athīr’s account, *infra*, with the significant omission of the religious terms employed by the latter to describe Yaʿqūb.

people of Sijistān who was famous for *taṭawwun*^c in fighting the Khārijites, called Ṣāliḥ b. al-Naḍīr [*sic*] al-Kinānī al-Mutaṭawwi‘ī, from Bust. [After Ya‘qūb and ‘Amr] became his companions and gained his favour, the *khawārij* who are called *shurāt* killed the brother of the afore-mentioned Ya‘qūb. [Afterwards] Ṣāliḥ made Ya‘qūb his deputy, then Ṣāliḥ perished, and Dirham b. al-Ḥusayn was appointed in his place, also from among the *Mutaṭawwi‘a*; Ya‘qūb became with Dirham as he had been with Ṣāliḥ [i. e. his deputy].⁹⁰

This passage makes clear that not only were these ‘*ayyār*s volunteer fighters; they also seem to have practiced asceticism of some sort. This latter observation is confirmed by further information which Ibn Khallikān relates of the ‘*ayyār* leader Dirham b. Naṣr, information that would seem to indicate the latter’s religious devotion:

Then the lord of Khurāsān [i. e. the Ṭāhirid ruler] strove with Dirham until he overcame him; he was carried to Baghdād, and imprisoned there. Then he was freed and served the central authorities, and [afterwards] stayed at home practicing religious duties [*nusk*], the Ḥajj, and self-denial [*al-iqtiṣād*].⁹¹

This idea of religious asceticism is further reinforced by Ibn al-Athīr’s description of Ya‘qūb and his brother ‘Amr:

Ya‘qūb and his brother ‘Amr were both coppersmiths in Sijistān. They manifested abstemiousness and asceticism (*al-zuhd wa’l-taqashshuf*).⁹² In their day there was a man from among the people of Sijistān who proclaimed volunteer fighting for religion (*taṭawwun*^c) in fighting the Khawārij, who was called Ṣāliḥ al-Mutaṭawwi‘ī. Ya‘qūb became his companion (*ṣāḥabahu Ya‘qūb*), fought by his side, and enjoyed his favour, so that he made him his deputy. Then Ṣāliḥ died, and another man, Dirham, took his place; Ya‘qūb became with Dirham what he had previously been with Ṣāliḥ before him. [i. e. his deputy]⁹³

Ibn al-Athīr’s description is significant, for it is highly unusual for him to describe political figures in religious terms.⁹⁴ Furthermore, Ibn Khallikān confirms the volunteer fighter portrait further in his entry, when he quotes from a different, earlier source, which – though silent on the question of Ya‘qūb’s ascetic practices – confirms the basic *ghāzī* picture: “Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth al-Ṣaffār re-

⁹⁰ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-‘ayān*, vol. 5, p. 345.

⁹¹ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-‘ayān*, vol. 5, p. 345.

⁹² These are both notoriously difficult terms to translate or closely define. For a discussion of *zuhd*, see L. Kinberg, “What is meant by *zuhd*?” *Studia Islamica* 61 (1985), pp. 27-44. Muḥammad al-Fāḍil b. ‘Ashūr’s *al-Taqashshuf fi’l-Islām*, Tunis, 1383/c. 1963, never manages to arrive at a definition at all.

⁹³ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 184-185. Note the similarity in the final phrases to Ibn Khallikān’s work; the latter freely admits that he lifted this part from Ibn al-Athīr.

⁹⁴ Note, for instance, that in his eulogy of the Sāmānid ruler Ismā‘il b. Aḥmad (Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 9, p. 5), he does not use this religious terminology; Ismā‘il is described as “intelligent, noble, well-behaved toward his subjects, forbearing [*ḥalīman*]. ...” In other authors as well, the phrase “*zuhd wa-taqashshuf*” is normally applied to religious figures – see e. g. al-Dhahabī’s biography of the *faqīh* Ismā‘il b. Yahyā b. Ismā‘il b. ‘Amr b. Muslim al-Faqīh (*Tārīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 67).

mained stationed in Sijistān, fighting the Khārijites and the Turks, and manifesting that he was a *mutaṭawwiʿ* ...”⁹⁵ Yet another author employs a description in which both the ascetic and the holy warrior aspects are explicitly referred to: “[Yaʿqūb] and his brother ʿAmr used to work in copper, but then they became ascetics [*fa-tazabbadā*] and waged *jibād* together with Šāliḥ the *muttaṭawwiʿī* who was fighting the Khārijites.”⁹⁶

There are also further, early accounts from the mid-tenth century which both use “*mutaṭawwiʿ*” as an equivalent term for *ʿayyār*, and expressly attribute a religious mission to these people:

There was a man in this area, known as Dirham b. Naṣr, who had with him a large group which manifested the religious merit of *ghazw* and combating the Khārijites. So these brothers [i. e. Yaʿqūb and his siblings] went with the group of [Dirham]’s companions and made for Sijistān, whose governor on behalf of the Ṭāhirids, Ibrāhīm b. al-Ḥusayn [al-Qūṣī], was feeble. And he [presumably, Yaʿqūb] alighted at the gate of the city, where Dirham b. Naṣr was proclaiming that he was of the *mutaṭawwiʿa*, and that he aimed to fight the Khārijites as a pious deed [*muḥtasib*]. So he won over the people and they submitted to him [Iṣṭakhri: until they inclined toward him]. He entered the city, then went out of it to one of the outlying areas and did not cease [his activities] until he had taken possession of the countryside.⁹⁷

Perhaps the most precious account of Yaʿqūb which has come down to us is that of Yaʿqūbī, who actually lived during Yaʿqūb’s time and whose chronicle ends just before Yaʿqūb’s rift with the Caliph. What we have in his account, therefore, is a vision of Yaʿqūb and his *ʿayyārs* as viewed by Yaʿqūb’s exact contemporary, before the ʿAbbāsids and Sāmānids blackened the Ṣaffārid name. Yaʿqūbī writes the following:

A group of the Khārijites and others in Khurāsān revolted, and the *shurāt* in Khurāsān grew strong until they were on the point of taking over Sijistān; but Yaʿqūb b. al-Layth arose, who is known as al-Ṣaffār, a man of courage and intrepidity, and asked Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir to permit him to go out [to fight] the *shurāt* and gather the *mutaṭawwiʿa*. [Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir] gave him permission to do this, so he went to Sijistān, and expelled those Khārijites who were in it ...⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-ʿayyān*, vol. 5, p. 345.

⁹⁶ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar ʿalām al-nubalāʾ*, vol. 12, p. 513. See also *idem*, *Taʾriḫ al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 203, where he states that both Yaʿqūb and ʿAmr “manifested *zubb*. Šāliḥ b. al-Naḍir the *muttaṭawwiʿī* was renowned for fighting the Khārijites, and the two [brothers] became his companions until he died. Then Dirham b. al-Ḥusayn the *muttaṭawwiʿī* took his place, and Yaʿqūb remained with him.”

⁹⁷ Abūʾl-Qāsim b. Ḥawqal, *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ*, part 2, pp. 419-420. This is the exact wording used in al-Iṣṭakhri, *Masālik al-mamālik*, p. 246, upon whom Ibn Ḥawqal based his own report (see Miquel’s entry “Ibn Ḥawqal” in *EI*², vol. III, pp. 786-788). For an evaluation of the position of both see Johannes Kramers, “L’influence de la tradition iranienne dans la géographie arabe,” *Analecta Orientalia*, Leiden, 1984, vol. 1, pp. 151-156.

⁹⁸ al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾriḫ*, vol. II, p. 495.

This account – the sole contemporary account – is valuable on several fronts. First, it demonstrates that Ya‘qūb was at this time viewed as a legitimate ruler rather than a usurper. Ya‘qūbī’s prettification of his rise to power is evidence of this: the issue is not whether or not governors or sub-governors asked permission before or after seizing power; the point is that someone considered to be a legitimate ruler is always presented as having been given a priori sanction for his seizure of control.⁹⁹ Second, this source confirms that before Ya‘qūb’s rift with al-Mu‘tamid, he was viewed not only as a legitimately appointed political leader, but also as a religious warrior. Indeed, even his enemies seem to have recognized this quality in him; thus the ousted Ṭāhirid subgovernor of Herāt, the Sāmānid Ibrāhīm b. Ilyās b. Asad, describes Ya‘qūb as possessing “a *ghāzī* nature” [*ghāzī tab*].¹⁰⁰

In fact, there are only two accounts of Ya‘qūb’s *‘ayyār* beginnings¹⁰¹ – both problematic for various reasons – which give a negative view of those origins:

Layth was a Sistānī coppersmith [*raṣṣar*] lad.¹⁰² When he became proud, he did not think much of copper-smithery, but entered into the exercise of arms and *‘ayyārī* and highway robbery [*rābzānī uftād*]. But in that road he travelled the path of justice; [he] would never take anyone’s money wholly, and sometimes he gave some of it back. One night he picked the treasury of Dirham b. Naṣr b. Rāfi‘ b. Layth b. Naṣr b. Sayyār [*sic*] who was governor of Sistān, and took out an unparalleled amount of money. Then something lustrous fell. He imagined that it was a gem. He picked it up and touched it with his tongue: it was salt. The claim of the salt before him overcame the grasping for money, and he left the money.¹⁰³ In the morning, the treasurer was struck with wonder, and called upon Dirham b. Naṣr. Dirham proclaimed an amnesty for the thief, in order for him to appear. Layth al-Ṣaffār went before him. Dirham asked him: “What was the

⁹⁹ *Vide infra*, Chapter 6, for the parallel whitewashing of the Sāmānid rise in Transoxiana.

¹⁰⁰ *Tārīkh-i Sistān*, p. 209.

¹⁰¹ Muḥammad b. Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn Khwāvandshāh Mīrkhwānd’s *Tārīkh rawdat al-ṣafā’*, Tehran, 1959-1960, vol. 4, p. 11, contains a very negative account, but since it never acknowledges Ya‘qūb as having been an *‘ayyār* at all, the fact that it omits this term from its clearly anti-Ya‘qūb discussion actually militates in favour of attributing a positive denotation to the term.

¹⁰² The irresolvable question of Ya‘qūb’s social origins will not be dealt with here. Suffice to say that while he was almost certainly not a descendant of old Persian royalty, as the *Tārīkh-i Sistān* would have us believe (pp. 200-202), he also was probably not the impecunious ragamuffin that some of the more negative accounts try in belittlement to depict him as being (e. g. *Tārīkh-i Gardīzi*, p. 354). Skladanek has offered an ingenious explanation for the Sasanian descent tradition; namely, that Sulyamān b. Hamūn b. Kaykhusraw, an actual member of the Sasanian royal family, was in business with Ya‘qūb’s father (Skladanek, “External Policy and Interdynastic Relations under the Ṣaffārids,” *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 36 [1974], p. 134). A more likely explanation is the tendency, already noted and disparaged by al-Bīrūnī, to invent glorious ancestors for one’s self or one’s heroes; see J. Meisami, *Persian Historiography to the End of the Twelfth Century*, Edinburgh, 1999, p. 21.

¹⁰³ According to Middle Eastern social norms, once one has tasted of another’s salt, he is that person’s guest and is therefore bound by the rules of hospitality. Al-Layth’s sense of honor, therefore, would not have allowed him to rob Dirham after having tasted of his salt. The author is indebted to Roy Mottahedeh for this elucidation.

cause, when you had power over the money, that you did not take it?" Layth related the story of the salt and its claim [*ḥaqq-i ān*]. He pleased Dirham, so [Dirham] gave him the status of a *chāvashi* at his court. He became next to him in rank and place, and was the army commander [*amīr-i lashkar*] ...¹⁰⁴

This account, however, is suspect as a work of history for several reasons. First, it relates obviously apocryphal anecdotes.¹⁰⁵ Second and far more importantly, it is riddled with factual errors – Ya'qūb is the one whom all other sources report as having had dealings with Dirham b. Naṣr, not al-Layth; the account mistakenly places Dirham before Ṣāliḥ, whom it then erroneously makes into Dirham's son; Dirham is confused with Naṣr-i Sayyārī, the actual governor of Sistān in the 220s/late-830s, and then further confounded – and compounded – with the famous rebel Rāfi' b. al-Layth, and so forth. Third, the source itself is post-Mongol. This means not only that it therefore very strongly toes the 'Abbāsīd – Sāmānid line, without apparently transmitting any earlier material, but also that its view and definition of 'ayyārī may very well derive from much later social conditions not applicable to our period.¹⁰⁶ It seems, though, more likely that the author was simply pro-Sāmānid and anti-Ya'qūb, in view of the little-known fact that he describes Sāmān, the eponymous founder of the Sāmānid dynasty and an important political figure, as having himself been an 'ayyār before becoming governor of the town of Ashnās.¹⁰⁷

The second negative account is really more of an admixture; on the one hand, Gardīzī was unapologetically pro-Sāmānid, writing in the Ghaznavid court (which had taken over – literally, including administrative personnel¹⁰⁸ – from the Sāmānids in the mid-11th century,¹⁰⁹) and basing himself upon a work written by Sallāmī, a Sāmānid courtier.¹¹⁰ On the other, he attempts to give an accurate historical account together with his pro-Sāmānid stances; thus, while denigrating Ya'qūb (referring, for instance, to Ya'qūb's entire rule as “the *fitna* of Ya'qūb b. al-Layth”), the author seems forced to acknowledge the latter's outstanding personal qualities:

¹⁰⁴ Ḥamd Allāh Mustawfī Qazvinī, *Tārīkh-i guzida*, p. 270.

¹⁰⁵ This tends to be a problem generally with the *Tārīkh-i guzida*, whose author's literary taste and historical method seems to bear much in common with Notker the Stammerer's. Note, though, that if this account were correct, Ya'qūb would have been a courtier's son.

¹⁰⁶ Unlike in the case of Ibn Khallikān, for example, who not only cites earlier authors but actually informs us whom he is citing and when he is doing so. In fact, the traditions about Ya'qūb themselves became so distorted over the ages that by the time we reach Mīrkhwānd, in the fifteenth century A. D., he does not mention 'ayyārī at all; Ya'qūb has been fully transformed into a mere highway robber. (*Tārīkh-i guzida*, vol. 4, p. 11)

¹⁰⁷ *Tārīkh-i guzida*, p. 376.

¹⁰⁸ See Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids*, p. 57. He notes that “These former Sāmānid officials strengthened the continuity in traditions and techniques between the Sāmānid and Ghaznavid administrations.”

¹⁰⁹ See *EP*, sv “Gardizi” (Barthold), vol. II, p. 978.

¹¹⁰ Barthold, “Zur Geschichte der Šaffāriden,” *op. cit.*, in his discussion of sources.

Ya'qūb b. al-Layth b. Mu'addil was a low-born man from the villages of Sistān, from Dih Qarnayn. When he came to the city he chose the craft of copper-smithery and learnt it, and was a hired labourer for the pay of fifteen dirhams a month. The reason for his rise in importance was this: that he was a devoted and professed *javānmarā'*¹¹¹ and associated with gentlemen [*bā mardomān khurdī*]; moreover he was prudent and manly, and treated all his relatives respectfully. In every occupation that he found himself, among the practitioners of that occupation he was a leader. After being a copper-smith he became an *'ayyār*; after that he turned to robbery and highway banditry; then he became a *sarhang*,¹¹² and a mounted soldier, and in this manner by degrees he arrived at the amirate. He acquired the first *sarhang*-ship of Bust from Nāšir b. Šāliḥ, then acquired the amirate of Sistān.¹¹³

Note that even here, *'ayyārī* is not equated with banditry; on the contrary, it is explicitly listed as a profession different from that of robbery, although Gardīzī gives no definition of what the profession entails.

To continue with Ya'qūb's activities, however: after joining Šāliḥ's band, Ya'qūb then set about fighting the Khārijite threat in Sistān, which had flared up yet again in an insurrection led by a man called, appropriately, "Ammār the Khārijite."¹¹⁴ Ya'qūb's boss Šāliḥ soon ran into trouble with the actual governor of Sistān, who sent troops to fight him. It is not clear from our sources whether the conflict between the governor and the *'ayyārān* stemmed from an understandable alarm on the part of the governor at having such a large and autonomous militia roaming freely about his province – which actually seems to have been a quite normal situation in this time and place, odd as that may seem to a modern reader; or whether there was not, rather, a more fundamental underlying tension between the two sides due to the governor's friendly attitude toward the Khārijites.¹¹⁵

After several battles, in each of which the victory went to a different side, a dramatic confrontation took place in 234/854 in Sistān's capital city, Zarang:

Šāliḥ, at night, came into the city with Ya'qūb b. al-Layth and [the latter's] two brothers, 'Amr and 'Alī; Dirham b. Naḍir [*sic*]; and Ḥamid b. 'Amr ... and the *'ayyārs* of Sistān [*'ayyārān-i Sistān*] were with them ... The next morning, Šāliḥ came out, and the party which he had gathered to him in Sistān – and there were many men there – assembled. Ibrāhīm al-Qūšī gathered the *shaykhs* and the *fuqahā'* and armed the soldiers of the army – both infantry and cavalry – then sent [three of the elders] to Šāliḥ to ask, "For what business did you come here?" ... Šāliḥ replied: "I have come to fight the Khārijites. Today or tomorrow I shall go; there is no war between Ibrāhīm al-Qūšī and me."¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Best translated as "chivalrous person." For an excellent definition of this word, written in the century after Gardīzī's description, *vide* Kaykāvūs b. Iskandar b. Qābūs b. Vashmgīr b. Ziyār, *Kitāb-i naṣīḥat nāma, ma'rūf ba-Qābūs nāma*, ed. Amin 'Abdulmajid Badavī, Tehran, 1963, pp. 179-183, discussed *infra*, Chapter 7.

¹¹² A position of military commander; *vide* Bosworth's definition, *s. v.* "Sarhang," *EI*?

¹¹³ Gardīzī, *Tārīkh-i Gardīzī*, pp. 354-355.

¹¹⁴ *Tārīkh-i Sistān*, p. 193.

¹¹⁵ *Vide infra*.

¹¹⁶ *Tārīkh-i Sistān*, pp. 194-195.

Thus, we see an insistence on the part of the *‘ayyār* leader that he is trying to go about his business of fighting heretics, and has no desire to become entangled with the governor, although his group obviously had poor relations with the governor to begin with. Nevertheless, Šāliḥ apparently began to evacuate his militia from the city at the behest of the religious leaders.

Matters did not end here, however; on his way out of Zarang Šāliḥ ran into the fully armed forces of Ibrāhīm, which were obviously preparing to attack him. Although this entire army fled at the sight of the *‘ayyārs*, barricading themselves into the citadel, this attempted surprise attack opened hostilities; Šāliḥ ordered the *‘ayyārs* to enter the citadel and kill the would-be attackers.¹¹⁷ Ibrāhīm al-Qūṣī, the governor, now showed his true colors (and perhaps the true source of the tension between himself and the *‘ayyārs* of Sistān) by promptly fleeing to ‘Ammār the Khārijite, “with whom he had an agreement.”¹¹⁸

In reaction, Šāliḥ seized Ibrāhīm’s treasury and was consequently in danger of being killed by an infuriated mob. At this point, we see the first of many connections between *‘ayyārs* and prominent Sunni *‘ulamā’*; Šāliḥ’s reaction to the chaotic situation was to visit the prominent juriconsult ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān,¹¹⁹ who told him, “You should not have done this.” Šāliḥ explained that he had wanted to avenge the blood of his brother, who had been killed by the Khārijites, and, tellingly, adds “I therefore thought that you would help me in this.”¹²⁰ In other words, he must previously have had enough contact with the scholar both to have cared what the latter thought and to be under the impression that the juriconsult would be on his side; he would also seem to be implying that he had no doubt that ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān would support anti-Khārijite enterprises of this type.

Ibrāhīm promptly returned to the city with a Khārijite army; Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth and two other commanders were sent out to battle them with the black banners of the ‘Abbāsids prominently displayed, while the erstwhile governor and his Khārijite supporters carried the white banners of religious dissent.¹²¹ When the populace, both notables and the common people, saw those white banners, on account of the Khārijites they assisted Šāliḥ and the *‘ayyārān* rather than their official governor, fighting a fierce battle; many people from both sides

¹¹⁷ *Tārīkh-i Sistān*, pp. 195-196.

¹¹⁸ *Tārīkh-i Sistān*, p. 196.

¹¹⁹ See *infra*, Chapter 4, for biographical information on ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān, who was one of the leading religious figures in Sistān at this time.

¹²⁰ *Tārīkh-i Sistān*, pp. 196-197.

¹²¹ On the ‘Abbāsīd meaning attached to the color black see Khalīl ‘Athāmina, “The Black Banners and the Socio-Political Significance of Banners and Slogans in Medieval Islam,” *Arabica* 36 (1989), pp. 307-326. Regarding the color white, Farouk Omar has noted that “white was a symbol of resentment and defiance to [*sic*] the authority of the *Musawwidā*.” (“The Significance of the Colours of Banners in the Early ‘Abbāsīd [*sic*] Period,” *‘Abbāsīyyāt: Studies in the History of the Early ‘Abbāsīds*, Baghdad, 1976, p. 149)

were killed. In the end, ‘Ammār and Ibrāhīm b. Ḥusayn al-Qūṣī retreated in defeat, and Ṣāliḥ’s power grew.¹²² The salient point of this encounter is the light it sheds on the politico-religious motivation of the ‘*ayyārān*, for it not only explains why the ‘*ayyārān* had been fighting this governor, but also shows that it was the ‘*ayyār* force of Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth, rather than the Ṭāhirid-appointed governor, who represented religious orthodoxy in Sīstān at this time.

The Ṭāhirid ruler of Khurāsān, Ṭāhir b. ‘Abdallāh, continued supporting Ibrāhīm al-Qūṣī, while Ya‘qūb continued battling the Khārijites and Ibrāhīm’s forces in general. According to the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, quarrels broke out, however, between Ya‘qūb and the Sīstānī ‘*ayyār*s on the one hand, and Ṣāliḥ and his supporters from Bust on the other.¹²³ As a result of the clash between the two sides, Dirham b. Naṣr took control of the province, “and the army of Sīstān also at this time swore allegiance to Dirham b. Naṣr. Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth and Hamid-i Sarnavak became his commanders (*ṣipāhsālārān*), and they continually battled against the Khārijites and his [i. e. Dirham’s] opponents.”¹²⁴

Again according to the same source, Dirham’s mind then became poisoned with jealousy of Ya‘qūb, “when he saw the valour [*ṣardī*] and bravery of Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth, and the reverence toward him in the hearts of the people.” Dirham therefore plotted to kill Ya‘qūb, who, however, got wind of the plot and launched a preventive *coup d’état* against Dirham. And thus it was that Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth became the ruler of Sīstān in 247/861.¹²⁵

This is one of the versions of events which ascribes the most active role to Ya‘qūb in the deposition of Dirham; many alternative versions, while agreeing with the basic outline of this story, attribute the ousting of Dirham to others. According to the early author Ibn Ḥawqal,¹²⁶ for instance, Ya‘qūb ended up assuming leadership not through a military coup but rather because Dirham’s companions, the leadership of the militia, deposed Dirham in favour of the more talented Ya‘qūb. Note that Dirham, according to this account, maintained good relations with Ya‘qūb until much later, after he had spent several years in

¹²² *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, *loc. cit.*

¹²³ Although the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān* attributes the break between Ya‘qūb and Ṣāliḥ’s bands solely to rivalry (p. 197), the fact that Ṣāliḥ had no qualms shortly thereafter about seeking refuge with the pagan Zunbil and inciting him to war against the Muslims (p. 205) suggests that there may have been a deeper underlying cause for the rift. Also, note that Mīrkhwānd’s account seems to mix up the Ṭāhirid campaign to oust Dirham with a campaign to oust Ṣāliḥ; in this latter scheme of events, there was no falling out between Ṣāliḥ and Ya‘qūb (*Rawḍat al-ṣafā*, vol. 4, p. 11).

¹²⁴ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, pp. 198-199.

¹²⁵ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, pp. 199-200.

¹²⁶ Ibn Ḥawqal wrote in the mid-tenth century, but based himself largely on the even earlier writer al-Iṣṭakhrī. Uniquely, he claims that Ya‘qūb began his career as “a slave to one of the coppersmiths of Sīstān.” (Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ*, vol. 2, p. 419) As far as the present author has been able to ascertain, this imputation of a slave origin to Ya‘qūb is probably an original invention intended to denigrate.

Baghdad (at which time, as we shall see, he apparently joined the Caliph's side in the latter's imbroglio with Ya'qūb):

Dirham b. Naṣr would proclaim that he was of the *mutatawwi'a*, and that he aimed to fight the Khārijites as a pious deed [*muhtasib^{am}*]. So he won over the people and they submitted to him and he entered the city. He then went out of it to one of the outlying areas and did not cease until he had taken possession of the countryside. The Khārijites fought him; they had a chief known as 'Ammār b. Yāsir. He [Dirham] entrusted Ya'qūb b. al-Layth with the task of fighting him, so he fought him and 'Ammār was killed. No important matter would befall them without its being entrusted to Ya'qūb, [such that] this power increased to him in accordance with his wishes [*'alā mā yuḥibbuhū*],¹²⁷ and he won over the companions of Dirham b. al-Naṣr to the point where they appointed him to the leadership, and rule became his. Dirham b. Naṣr after this became one of Ya'qūb's band and his companions, and he [Ya'qūb] remained friendly towards Dirham b. Naṣr until the time when [Dirham] asked permission of [Ya'qūb] to go on the Ḥajj; [Ya'qūb] permitted him to do so, so he went on the Ḥajj and remained in Baghdad for a while, then returned to 'Amr [b. al-Layth] as a messenger of the Commander of the Faithful, and Ya'qūb killed him.¹²⁸

Ibn al-Athīr, interestingly, presents two accounts of the transfer of power from Dirham to Ya'qūb, both of which portray Ya'qūb in a most favourable light. Ibn al-Athīr's first rendition is as follows:

And in [this year – 237/851f.] a man from among the people of Bust, named Ṣāliḥ b. al-Naṣr al-Kinānī, gained mastery over Sijistān, and with him Ya'qūb b. al-Layth. Then Ṭāhir b. 'Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir became commander of [*amīr*] Khurāsān and recovered it [i. e. Sīstān] from his hands.

Then there appeared someone there [i. e. in Sīstān] named Dirham b. al-Ḥusayn [*sic*],¹²⁹ of the *mutatawwi'a*, and gained mastery over [Sijistān]; but he was not the captain of his army, rather Ya'qūb b. al-Layth was the commander of his army. When Dirham's companions saw his weakness and his impotence [as a military leader], they agreed upon Ya'qūb b. al-Layth, and they transferred the rule over them to him, because of what they saw of his organizational skills, his good policy, and his concerning himself with their affairs. When this became clear to Dirham, he did not contend with [Ya'qūb] for rule, but rather surrendered it to him, and was deposed from [power]. So Ya'qūb alone possessed power; he had command over the country, his might grew, and troops from every area sought him out [in order to join him]; and we shall, God willing, relate what became of his rule.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ The alternative understanding of this phrase would be, “against his wishes,” in which case the passage would imply that Ya'qūb had no active role at all in undermining Dirham.

¹²⁸ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ*, vol. 2, pp. 419-420, more or less quoting from Iṣṭakhrī, pp. 246-247. The *Ta'riḫ sinī mulūk al-arḍ*, p. 169, also agrees closely with this version of affairs.

¹²⁹ Ibn al-Athīr appears to be confusing Dirham's genealogy with that of the pro-Khārijite governor Ibrāhīm. Note, though, that the early *Ta'riḫ sinī mulūk al-arḍ* (p. 169) also gives Dirham this paternity.

¹³⁰ Ibn al-Athīr, *loc. cit.*, pp. 64-65; repeated by Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, vol. 12, p. 513, and *idem*, *Ta'riḫ al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 204. Even the anti-Ṣaffārid *Rawḍat al-ṣafā'*, vol. 4, p. 11, has preserved this version of events.

Subsequently, however, the author gives us yet another recounting of these events, one in which Dirham is said to have lost his position simply due to his having been imprisoned by the stratagems of the Ṭāhirid governor of Khurāsān and removed from the scene:

Then the lord of Khurāsān beguiled Dirham, when his rule had grown strong and his followers many, so that he defeated him, and sent him to Baghdād and imprisoned him there, then released him, and he served the Caliph in Baghdād.

Ya‘qūb’s rule grew strong after the taking of Dirham; he became the leader of the volunteer warriors for the faith (*mutawallī amr al-mutaṭawwi‘a*) in place of Dirham, and he undertook to war against the *shurāt*. He vanquished them, and killed many of them, so that he all but annihilated them, and he destroyed their villages. His companions followed him because of his cunning (*makrihi*), the excellence of his condition (*busn ḥālīhi*), and his opinions, with an obedience with the like of which they had never obeyed anyone before him. His might grew great, so that he made himself master of Sijistān; and he scrupulously obeyed the Caliph, corresponding with him, and acting upon his command. He made clear that it was his command to fight the *shurāt*, and he ruled Sijistān, regulated the roads and guarded them, and commanded the good and forbade that which is abominable [*amara bi’l-ma‘rūf wa – nahā ‘an al-munkar*]; and the number of his followers grew.¹³¹

We see here both elements of Ibn Ḥawqal’s story preserved – in the first version, that it was Dirham’s own band which decided that Ya‘qūb was better fitted to lead the *mutaṭawwi‘a*; and in the second, the tradition that Dirham somehow ended up in Baghdad, either voluntarily or involuntarily.¹³² Interestingly, even *Rawḍat al-ṣafā’*, which, like most later Persian works, is not very positively inclined toward the Ṣaffārids, has preserved elements of the traditions we just examined: namely, that Ya‘qūb was extremely successful in defeating the Khārijite *fitna*, and that “his companions and servants carried out his orders [so meticulously] that an obedience greater than that could not be imagined.”¹³³ The most significant fact to be gleaned here, however, is that Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth is once again specifically declared to have been a *mutaṭawwi‘*, occupied with commanding right and forbidding wrong.

In any event, in 247/861 Ya‘qūb became master of Sistān, and aside from having to suppress the attempted coup d’état of a disgruntled former associate, and possibly the deposed Dirham, he devoted himself to combating the Khārijites; indeed, we are told that “he would fight the Khārijites every day.” Moreover, “he

¹³¹ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 185; al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 204. Ibn Khalīkān as well (see *supra*) attributes Dirham’s imprisonment to the Ṭāhirids, as does al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 204: “Then the *amīr Khurāsān* was victorious over Dirham, and sent him to Baghdād and jailed him, then freed him and he served the Caliph; then he became pious [*tanassaka*] and kept performing the Ḥajj, and remained in his house.”

¹³² According to Ṭabarī, by the year 262/875f the caliph was using Dirham as his personal messenger to Ya‘qūb (*Ta’rīkh*, vol. 9, p. 516).

¹³³ *Rawḍat al-ṣafā’*, vol. 4, p. 11.

summoned all the people [presumably, to proper Islam], and freed the prisoners and gave them robes of honor ...”¹³⁴

Ya‘qūb then sent a message to ‘Ammār the Khārijite which has given rise to a variety of interpretations.¹³⁵ In this message, which would appear to have been a masterly political manoeuvre, he states that the Khārijites had been able to thrive in Sīstān for so long a) on account of their opposition to the injustices of the governors sent to the province; b) due to their never having molested the Sīstānī inhabitants; and c) the pre-occupation of certain of the governors with *ghazw* against the neighboring infidels. Ya‘qūb then extends to the Khārijites a very remarkable appeal, one which is reminiscent both of the tactics of Abū Muslim in winning over opponents¹³⁶ and, even more, of the Prophet’s strategy at Ḥudaybiyya (i. e. buying time from those he planned to destroy in order to consolidate his own power to the point where he could successfully do so).¹³⁷

Ya‘qūb then proceeded to inform ‘Ammār that “Now the situation is entirely different; if you want to remain in peace, get out of your head the [idea of] the commandership of the faithful.” Ya‘qūb then enjoins ‘Ammār: “Arise with your army and make one cause with us; for we have arisen with true faith [presumably, in contrast to the previous governors of Sīstān], so that we shall never give Sīstān to be trampled again under anyone.” In other words, Ya‘qūb is appealing to the Khārijites on the grounds of piety and good government, the lack of which had formed the most common complaints against previous governors of Sīstān and fueled Khārijite appeal among the broader populace. Although the meaning is ambiguous and lends itself to more than one interpretation, it would seem that Sīstān is mentioned in this context not because of local particularism, but merely as the part of the Dār al-Islām in which these men hold power; this seems all the more likely because ‘Ammār, far from being a Sīstānī particularist, is specifically stated to have been aspiring to the universal caliphate, and Ya‘qūb is trying to talk him out of his delusions of grandeur. That there are actually pan-Islamic undertones in this missive seems all the more likely in view of Ya‘qūb’s

¹³⁴ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 202.

¹³⁵ Thus, for instance, Bosworth (*The History of the Saffārids of Sīstān*, p. 78) again understands Ya‘qūb to have been motivated by Sīstānī particularism: “both he and ‘Ammār represented, in different ways, the interests of the people of Sīstān against the officials of the alien Tāhirids and ‘Abbāsids, whose rule had been tyrannical and directed at financial exploitation.”

¹³⁶ See M. Sharon, *Revolt: The Social and Military Aspects of the ‘Abbāsīd Revolution*, p. 110. Like Ya‘qūb, Abū Muslim appealed to pious sentiments; according to the *Akhbār al-dawla al-‘abbāsīyya* many contemplated defecting to him “because [Abū Muslim]’s support for the Qur’ān and the *sunna* was far stronger than Naṣr [b. Sayyār]’s.” Ya‘qūb and Abū Muslim are also alike, of course, in their use of “*divide et impera*” strategies.

¹³⁷ Even the Prophet himself adopted on that occasion, as has been noted, an “apparently lenient position” in which he accepted conditions which ran directly counter to “the very essence of his prophetic mission.” M. Lecker, “The Ḥudaybiyya-Treaty and the Expedition against Khaybar,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 5 (1984), p. 1.

next statement: “If God gives [us] victory, we shall add to the province of Sīstān as much as we can. And [even] if this does not please you, do not bother anyone in Sīstān, but rather follow the custom of all the previous Khārijites [by not harassing the inhabitants of Sīstān]”¹³⁸

Thus, although all of these statements could indeed be interpreted as an appeal to Sīstānī particularism – which interpretation, even if correct, begs the question whether an appeal to local particularism expressed Ya‘qūb’s own philosophy or was merely a ruse used by Ya‘qūb because he thought such a sentiment would appeal to ‘Ammār – it could also very well be a simple statement of program. Ya‘qūb is announcing to ‘Ammār that he intends to set up a proper pious government in Sīstān – not because he is a local nationalist, but because that is the part of the Dār al-Islām in which he finds himself and for which he is therefore responsible – and he then intends to add presumably infidel territory to it, little by little. Furthermore, even assuming that Ya‘qūb was indeed appealing directly to Sīstānī particularist sentiment here, and that such an appeal arose from his own personal convictions rather than from a desire to appeal to ‘Ammār’s, this in no way negates the fact that the rest of his discourse is religious. He is trying to convince the Khārijites to acquiesce; obviously, he will use more than one argument to that end. Moreover, it would appear to be an argument specifically tailored to his opponents in this particular case; as we shall see, this is a unique instance in Ya‘qūb’s career of his making a Sīstānī appeal.¹³⁹

The letter had its desired effect; not only did ‘Ammār promise to refrain from molesting anyone, but (aided by the fact that “Ya‘qūb’s greatness began to become apparent, and he won many victories”¹⁴⁰) thousands of Khārijites began defecting to Ya‘qūb en masse when they saw that he would not only give them an amnesty but even let them fight in his forces.¹⁴¹ While penitent ex-Khārijites

¹³⁸ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, pp. 202–203.

¹³⁹ Note that the reports of Ibn Mamshādh’s poem do not pretend to any kind of Sīstānī (as opposed to Persian) particularism and, more importantly, are never claimed by any source to have been recited to Ya‘qūb. For a full discussion of this point, *vide infra*, Chapter 5.

¹⁴⁰ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 204.

¹⁴¹ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 205. The repentance of the Khārijites was probably not so unlikely as it sounds; the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān* tells us previously of a Khārijite man who of his own volition turned renegade and swore to “chase away all the Khārijites.” (p. 184) The fact that so many of them were willing to defect merely strengthens the likelihood that, somewhat akin to contemporary followers of officially Marxist movements in obscure parts of the world today, many of whom turn to Communism without ever having heard of, let alone read, Karl Marx, the Sīstānī Khārijites were protesting against the corruption and irreligiosity of their rulers. Ya‘qūb’s statement regarding his own “correct faith” seems to strengthen that hypothesis. It was, of course, also incumbent upon a good Muslim when fighting the *jihād* to invite his enemies to repent or convert. If the enemy acknowledged the error of his ways, he was to be welcomed (or welcomed back) into the Muslim fold (See e. g. Sulaymān b. al-Ash‘ath Abū Dā‘ūd al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-sunan*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Awwāma, Mecca, 1419/1998, pp. 261–262; and Ahmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. 1, p. 68, no. 67: “The Prophet ... said: I was commanded to fight the people until they would say: There is

were acceptable, Ya‘qūb had apparently always aimed at finally defeating the die-hard Khārijites. By 251/865f. Ya‘qūb finally felt strong enough and secure enough to move against ‘Ammār the Khārijite, whom he killed and whose army he put to the sword. The remaining Khārijites, “broken-hearted,” fled to the mountains of Isfizār and the Hindqanān valley.¹⁴²

Thus, Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth’s first activities concentrated on establishing order, particularly religious order, inside his home province, and on waging *jibād* against religious deviants, particularly Khārijites. From there it was a natural progression of events for a *mutatawwi‘* to venture into nearby infidel areas, as well as adjoining Muslim areas which had come under Khārijite influence, most notably Herāt and Būshanj.

Indeed, throughout all of Ya‘qūb’s history as Amīr of Sīstān, he continuously fought Khārijite heretics and non-Muslims, mainly in the areas known in the Islamic sources as Zābulistān and Kābulistān, ruled by the dynasties of the Zunbils¹⁴³ and the Kābul-Shāhs. These religiously benighted areas (at least from the Islamic standpoint) – part Buddhist, part Hindu, part old pagan, and even in parts already under Khārijite influence¹⁴⁴ – had long been a magnet for *ghāzīs* aspiring to fight for the faith and extend the borders of Islam. Whereas the Islamic histories tend to dwell on Ya‘qūb’s activities within the borders of *Dār al-Islām*, frequently mentioning his activities among the infidels only cursorily, these infidel-oriented activities were at least until the mid-250s/early 870s unquestionably the primary focus of his career. Indeed, one source sums up Ya‘qūb’s entire early career as follows:

He urged the people of Sijistān to fight the Turks who were on the borders of Khurāsān with the Rutbil [*sic*] ... so he raided them and was victorious over the Rutbil and killed him, and killed three [other] kings of the Turks, then returned to Sijistān. He brought back with him their heads together with thousands of other heads of them; and the kings who were around him feared him: the king of Multān, the king of al-Rukhkhaj, the king of al-Ṭabasayn and the kings of Sind.¹⁴⁵

no God but God, and when they said this their blood was protected from me, and their possessions ...”). This is probably the best explanation for Ya‘qūb’s otherwise inexplicable patience with people such as Muḥammad b. Wāṣil (*vide infra*), towards whom *realpolitik* and common sense would have dictated a less forbearing course of action; unlike in the case of Khārijite rank and file who, after repenting, could contribute to his war effort, it is difficult to see what Ya‘qūb’s motivation could have been in leaving someone such as Muḥammad b. Wāṣil alive and free other than that of executing the religious obligation.

¹⁴² *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 207.

¹⁴³ This was apparently the title of the ruler of Zābul and Kābul. See M. Forstner, “Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth und der Zunbil,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 120 (1970), pp. 69-83.

¹⁴⁴ Bosworth, *The Ṣaffārids*, p. 103.

¹⁴⁵ Al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 204; *idem. Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, vol. 12, pp. 513-514. The accounts go on to enumerate the magnificent presents Ya‘qūb sent from the plunder to the Caliph al-Mu‘tazz.

Even after he was drawn more heavily into the events transpiring in the central Islamic lands, campaigns in the East always remained an important part of his life; we are told that until the end, “Every year he would go on *ghazw* campaigns in the Land of the Infidels.” After his disappointment in the ‘Abbāsids in the 260s/870s, in fact, he seems to have simply gone back to devoting himself full-time to raiding infidels.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, our most detailed source of information on Ya‘qūb, informs us that he raided in some very intriguing places, such as Byzantium and Ceylon, possibly in his earlier years, about which no other record is preserved in the Muslim sources.¹⁴⁷

Ya‘qūb, therefore, as ruler continued to follow in the time-honoured tradition of border warfare for the greater Islamic good, beginning in the area around Bust (al-Rukhkhaj) in 249/863, whither Šāliḥ b. Naṣr, who had been causing trouble in Sīstān in the previous year and had made an alliance with the pagan Zunbil, had fled. Ya‘qūb won a tremendous victory against the Zunbil’s forces, but, supposedly, piously refused to take the elephants as booty, saying “I shall not take the elephants-for they are not fortunate: God remembers Abraha with an elephant.”¹⁴⁸ He was, at least to some degree, successful in the subjugation and Islamization of these areas; in the words of one writer, he was active in the marcher areas (“*hind wa sind*”) adjacent to Sīstān, “and [he] controlled these border areas and part of them were Islamized by Ya‘qūb.”¹⁴⁹ The next few years were occupied with the afore-mentioned war against ‘Ammār the Khārījite (in 251/865), then with suppressing the governor Ya‘qūb himself had appointed in al-Rukhkhaj, who had revolted against Šaffārid authority (252/866).¹⁵⁰

One should note that even at this early juncture, Ya‘qūb’s career was in many ways remarkable. He had manifested a singular lack of interest in the trappings of

¹⁴⁶ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 232.

¹⁴⁷ See *infra*, Chapter 5.

¹⁴⁸ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 206. Ya‘qūb is referring to Sūrat al-Fil (Qur’ān 105:1-5), in which the *aṣḥāb al-fil* are clearly not models that any good Muslim would want to emulate. The sūra has been interpreted as referring to a legendary expedition by a king or viceroy of Abyssinia, Abraha, to attack Mecca, supposedly in A. D. 570; there is very little historical evidence to support this legend (See Irfan Shahid, “Two Qur’ānic Sūras: al-Fil and Quraysh,” *Studia Arabica et Islamica: Festschrift for Iḥsān ‘Abbās on his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Wadād al-Qādī, Beirut, 1981, p. 435), especially in its chronological particulars (for revised dating see also M. J. Kister, “The campaign of Huluban: a new light on the expedition of Abraha,” *Le Muséon* 78 (1965), pp. 425-428, *passim*; and L. I. Conrad, “Abraha and Muḥammad: Some Observations apropos of Chronology and Literary Topoi in the Early Arabic Historical Tradition,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 50:2 [1987], pp. 225 – 240). The image presented here, in other words, whether true or not, is that Ya‘qūb did not want to commit any action in any way reminiscent of those impious ones, and therefore refused to take the animals to use in war. He also was not, as we shall see, the type of ruler who would be likely to keep elephants as a personal luxury item.

¹⁴⁹ Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Fārisī al-Iṣṭakhrī, *Kitāb al-masālik wa’l-mamālik*, ed. M. J. De Goeje, *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, vol. 1, Leiden, 1967, p. 247.

¹⁵⁰ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, pp. 207-208.

power – he minted no coins,¹⁵¹ built no buildings (or at least none that the sources tell us about),¹⁵² and pushed himself physically with constant campaigning. According to virtually all the information we have on Ya‘qūb’s early career inside Sistān, until this point, at least, Ya‘qūb had been fighting only those whom the Sunni Islamic mainstream of his time would have deemed to be religious deviants or infidels and their allies, either in his home province or in debatable marcher lands. If his career had ended here, he would undoubtedly be remembered only as he is portrayed by al-Ya‘qūbī, our sole surviving source dating from before Ya‘qūb’s break with the caliph: as a pious and steadfast volunteer Sunni warrior; and, concomitantly, the ‘*ayyārān* would also be defined as such by modern scholars. In 253/867, however, a new stage in Ya‘qūb’s career began when he set out for Herāt and began to come into conflict with some of the major political figures of the central Islamic lands.¹⁵³

In short, the sources for Ya‘qūb’s early career present him and his ‘*ayyār* followers – often explicitly so – as *mutaṭawwi‘a*. It was due to the conflicts which characterized the next stage of Ya‘qūb’s career that a concerted effort was subsequently made on the part of the Sāmānid rulers and the ‘Abbāsīd power behind the throne, the caliph’s brother al-Muwaffaq, to blacken Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth’s name and reputation – not because his political nature and aims had changed, but because political expediency now required that he be discredited. Since Ya‘qūb is history’s most famous and best-documented ‘*ayyār*, and the reputation of the institution of ‘*ayyārī* has, to a large degree, been judged by Nöldeke and his successors in light of their interpretation of Ya‘qūb’s career and actions, the ‘Abbāsīd-Sāmānid attempt to portray Ya‘qūb as a lawless, greedy bandit has seriously distorted the modern scholarly definition of the phenomenon of ‘*ayyārī* in general. As we shall see in the next two chapters, when the sources relating to Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth’s later, more famous career are subjected to scrutiny, this interpretation of the Ṣaffārid founder – and therefore of the pre-Saljūq ‘*ayyārān* – collapses.

¹⁵¹ See D. Tor, “A Numismatic History of the First Ṣaffārid Dynasty,” *Numismatic Chronicle* series 7, vol. 162 (2002), pp. 293-314.

¹⁵² This is a characteristic of the Jihad-oriented at this time: “... they saw the expenditure of money on permanent structures [as] a deviation from the permanent *jihād* that they felt was the salvation of society ... one literary by-product of this was the numerous traditions urging the believer to spend his money and his possessions in the pursuit of *jihād* ...” D. Cook, “Muslim Apocalyptic and *Jihād*,” p. 82. *Vide supra*, Chapter 2, where al-Awzā‘ī rejoices over his inheritance, because now that money can be dedicated to the Jihad.

¹⁵³ *Tārīkh-i Sistān*, p. 208. Ibn al-Athīr first places the conquest of Herāt in 248/862f (*al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 120), probably following Ṭabarī (*Tārīkh*, vol. 9, p. 255), then later (*al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 185) corrects himself.