

4. The ‘Ayyār Versus the Government: The Ṣaffārids and the Ṭāhirids

Why should we, in the compass of a pale,
Keep law and form and due proportion,
Showing as in a model our firm estate,
When our sea-walled garden, the whole land,
Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers choked up,
Her fruit trees all unpruned, her hedges ruined,
Her knots disordered, and her wholesome herbs
Swarming with caterpillars?

– *King Richard II*

We saw in the last chapter that the sources – even those overtly hostile to the Ṣaffārids – explicitly state that Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth’s early career as a Sīstānī ‘ayyār was that of a volunteer Sunni holy warrior (*mutaṭawwī*). It is now time to examine the more famous events of Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth’s career, and to see if and how they fit in with this earlier holy warrior career; for, as we have seen, the common view of ‘ayyārān was formed from a contextual definition, derived first and foremost from Ya‘qūb’s biography, since he is by far the best-documented historical ‘ayyār.

There were two flaws in this methodology, however; first, the source-base from which that definition was originally extrapolated was an extremely limited one: the very few works available to and utilized by Theodor Nöldeke in his brief sketch of Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth’s career. Second, Nöldeke, in arriving at his view that Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth was a self-serving military adventurer, seems to have adopted uncritically Ibn Khallikān’s particular interpretation of the events we shall examine in the next two chapters: Ya‘qūb’s later military campaigns in the Islamic world outside of Sīstān, and, especially, the mere fact that he campaigned against the Ṭāhirids and the Caliph al-Mu‘tamid.

In espousing this interpretation, Nöldeke ignored both the testimony that was available to him regarding the *mutaṭawwī* nature of Ya‘qūb’s activities, and the larger historical context. This larger historical context includes not only the political question of ‘Abbāsid-Ṣaffārid and Sāmānid-Ṣaffārid relations, but also the larger background of the collapse of the caliphate, with the ensuing political and religious chaos that event caused, and the rise of the independent Sunni volunteer religious warriors in reaction. In fairness, we should remember that not only was Nöldeke living before source-critical methodology became *de rigueur*, but that his sketch was undoubtedly never meant to bear the weight, as it has done, of defining all subsequent research on the subject.

The primary source testimony that Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth’s ‘ayyār career was essentially that of a volunteer holy warrior (*mutaṣawwi‘*) allows one to interpret Ya‘qūb’s later activities in a wholly new light. In these next two chapters we shall examine the evidence in order to demonstrate that the accounts in the sources support the holy warrior interpretation of Ya‘qūb’s character and later career as well or better than they buttress the more commonly accepted negative one.

We shall scrutinize most intensely those two episodes which have been taken as the most serious evidence of ‘ayyār lawlessness: namely, Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth’s overthrow of the Tāhirids, and, in the next chapter, his campaign against the Caliph al-Mu‘tamid in ‘Irāq. In the process, we shall discover that the Tāhirid government had all but collapsed when Ya‘qūb finally intervened in Khurāsān; that Ya‘qūb waited many years before actually sweeping away the Tāhirids entirely; and that when he finally did assume control of the Tāhirid domains, it was at the invitation of the populace, including many Tāhirid relatives and leading supporters. We shall examine in detail who Ya‘qūb’s supporters in the Tāhirid dominions were, in order to show that they were prominent clerics of the *abl al-ḥadīth* camp, directly connected to the *mutaṣawwi‘* tradition we traced in the second chapter of the present work.

This last discovery is extremely important, because it strengthens the Ya‘qūb-as-holy-warrior interpretation and correspondingly weakens the Ya‘qūb-as-reprobate one; strict Hanbalite clerics, particularly leading ones, tended not to support the latter kind of person, whereas they certainly did champion the former with great enthusiasm. The committed support which the sources record such men as having extended to the Ṣaffārid ‘ayyārs during the reign of both Ya‘qub b. al-Layth and, subsequently, his brother ‘Amr, therefore weighs heavily in favor of the religious warrior interpretation of both Ya‘qūb and of ‘ayyārī during the mid – and late-ninth century.

The Incursions into Tāhirid Lands

In order to understand why Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth expanded beyond the borders of Sīstān into Khurāsān, we must first understand the situation of the Tāhirid rulers of that province. The Tāhirid family were the hereditary governors of Khurāsān on behalf of the ‘Abbāsid caliphs between the years 821 and 873. All of the literary sources emphasize that, by Ya‘qūb’s period, the Tāhirids had become dismally ineffectual in dealing with the various heterodox threats which had arisen in their dominions – most notably the Zaydī Shi‘ites in the Caspian provinces and the Khārijites in the Herāt-Badghīs area.¹ Indeed, one scholar has even

¹ See e. g. Mirkhwānd, *Tārikh rawḍat al-ṣafā‘*, vol. 4, pp. 8-9; for a detailed description of the woes of Tāhirid government, see *infra*. The Khārijite tendencies of the Herāt area are mentioned in Ibn Ḥawqal, *Šūrat al-Ard*, vol. 2, p. 439.

pointed out that the Tāhirids themselves can be suspected of having taken a rather philo-‘Alid stance; not only were they none too zealous in putting down ‘Alid revolts, but it has even been suggested in explanation that they themselves may have harbored heterodox beliefs.²

The sources also inform us that as a result of this situation, many prominent figures in the Tāhirid state became thoroughly disenchanted with the dynasty, and were apparently casting about for someone to come save the sinking ship of state. Many respectable elements in Khurāsān, therefore, supported Ya‘qūb’s takeover of the Tāhirid state when that did eventually occur. Moreover, Ya‘qūb showed a great deal of forbearance toward Tāhirid incompetence; for several years, he only went into specific trouble spots to clean up affairs, limiting his activities to local operations and usually leaving again. He did not ever make an attempt to take over the Tāhirid state as a whole, according to the sources, until after he had received appeals from leading figures – particularly religious figures – to do so.

In short, the sources support the interpretation that Ya‘qūb was engaged in an attempt to restore the old unitary, orthodox Islamic order – and that, in the end (and it took him quite a long time to reach this point), he gave greater weight to this goal than to the formal legal recognition of the incompetent governors of a decayed dynasty who were, if not actively inimical to that welfare, at least not helping to further it. We must also remember that this was a period in which the very idea of political authority had been severely compromised and was arguably at its nadir; even caliphs were being deposed with alarming facility and frequency.³ Viewed in the historical context of the prevailing political instability and turmoil of the mid-ninth century, it is perhaps more surprising that Ya‘qub took several years to reach the conclusion that the Tāhirids were unresurrectable, than that he actually deposed them. We shall be returning to this question of proper Sunni behaviour toward authority later.⁴

That the Tāhirid dynasty was strikingly unsuccessful in managing affairs – and, in particular, in containing the heretical threats of Khārijites and Shī‘ite ‘Alids – there can be no doubt.⁵ It is worth citing again the passage from Ya‘qūbī’s *Ta’rīkh* on Tāhirid decline, because it is our sole surviving contemporary source:

When Tāhir died and Muḥammad his son was appointed governor – and on the day he was appointed he was young – a group of the Khawārij and others in Khurāsān revolted. The *shurāt* in Khurāsān grew strong until they were on the point of taking over Sijistān,

² Sourdel, “La politique religieuse,” pp. 11-12.

³ Vide e. g. Kennedy, *Armies of the Caliphs*, pp. 137-141, for the murders perpetrated on a series of caliphs between 861 and 870.

⁴ Vide *infra*, Chapter 5.

⁵ On ‘Alid rule in the Caspian area see Madelung, “The Minor Dynasties of Northern Iran,” *The Cambridge History of Iran. Volume IV: The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs*, ed. R. N. Frye, Cambridge, 1975, pp. 206-212, and *idem*. “Abū Ishāq al-Šābī on the ‘Alids of Tābaristān and Gilān,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 26 (1967), pp. 17-57.

but Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth, who is known as al-Šaffār, arose from among the people of courage and intrepidity (*abb al-ba’s wa’l-najda*), asking Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir to permit him to go out [to fight] the *shurāt* and gather the *mutaṭawwī’ā*. [Muhammad] gave him permission to do this, so he went to Sījistān, and expelled those Khārijites who were in it, then marched to Kirmān; he did thus until he had cleansed the province of them. His prestige [thereupon] grew stronger, so [the Caliph] al-Muṣṭafā’īn wrote to Muḥammad to make [Ya‘qūb] governor over Kirmān, and he established himself in it and he did good in the country.⁶

Thus, we see, first, that Ya‘qūb was aware for a very long time of Ṭāhirid incompetence before he finally felt compelled to act. Second, the source confirms that his campaigns were first and foremost a logical outgrowth of his unceasing war against the Khārijites. Moreover, we learn from Ya‘qūbī that Šaffārid actions were not, prior to his contretemps with the ‘Abbāsids, viewed at all negatively by his contemporaries, but, on the contrary, as good government; Ya‘qūb’s early positions were, according to this account, held not by usurpation but by the express permission of, first, the Ṭāhirid governor of Khurāsān and then the Caliph. No doubt, this is a prettification of what actually occurred, in the same way that the usurpations of all rulers from this period onwards – Sāmānid, Ghaznavids, and Saljūqs – were glossed over or prettified by chroniclers; but this is precisely the point. Ya‘qūb’s contemporaries **saw nothing wrong with his behaviour**, at least until he was so foolish as to pick a quarrel with the ‘Abbāsid al-Mu‘tamid and not carry that quarrel out to its logical conclusion.

Later chroniclers, too, mention Ṭāhirid weakness; Ibn al-Athīr repeatedly highlights the Ṭāhirids’ ineffectuality in controlling Khurāsān, particularly when it came to providing protection against what were in Sunni eyes religious deviants:

In the meanwhile Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir became weak. Many of the districts which had paid their *kharāj* to him rebelled against him, [until] nothing remained in his hands but a small part of Khurāsān. [Furthermore], most of that was in a state of sedition, going to war together with those who had taken over its [i. e. Khurāsān’s] areas, and the Khārijites who were causing havoc in its districts; and [Muhammad] did not have the capacity to control them. This was the reason for Ya‘qūb al-Šaffār’s gaining mastery over Khurāsān ...⁷

The Khārijite problem in particular, of course, would have drawn Ya‘qūb. Even scholars who follow the traditional school in their interpretation of Ya‘qūb’s career have noted the relationship between the early incursions and Ya‘qūb’s pursuit of Khārijites; Bosworth has remarked of Ya‘qūb’s first expansion into Khurāsān:

At the outset, this involved in large measure punitive and retaliatory raids by Ya‘qūb against the Khārijite bands which had been afflicting the Sīstān countryside and which

⁶ Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh al-Ya‘qūbī*, vol. 2, p. 495.

⁷ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 248.

had even attacked Zarang itself, working from the old-established Khārijite centres in Badghīs and Quhistān ...⁸

In fact, even a pro-Zaydī source, which one would expect to have opposed Ya‘qūb because of his campaigns against al-Ḥasan b. Zayd, mentions the weakness of both the Tāhirids and the caliphate when discussing Ya‘qūb’s conquest of Ṭabaristān:

In this time that the caliphs and Tāhir b. ‘Abdallāh were occupied with [the Zanj rebellion], many fitnas arose in Khurāsān, and *runūd* and ‘ayyārān operated openly; on every side someone rebelled, and the most fortunate of all was Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth al-Ṣaffār ...⁹

This source, interesting for its mention of ‘ayyārān, must be related to warily for several reasons, first and foremost its inaccuracies: for instance, according to all the earlier sources Ya‘qūb held power by caliphal and Tāhirid patents at least until his suppression of the Tāhirid dynasty; and the Zanj rebellion began only in 255/869, long after Ya‘qūb’s power had already become well-established. Its seeming contempt for ‘ayyārān, as well, dates of course from the thirteenth century, and therefore sheds little light on our time; for Ibn Isfandiyār, indeed, the fact that Ya‘qūb was an ‘ayyār may, in his time, merely have been further confirmation that the Ṣaffārid was simply a scoundrel. There is yet another possibility, however: that Ibn Isfandiyār’s attitude is not the result of a shift in the meaning of the word ‘ayyār, but rather an embodiment of the Shī‘ī view of this Sunni phenomenon; the ‘ayyārs were not kind to the Shī‘īs during the pre-Mongol centuries.¹⁰ The report is important, however, because it shows that even a source hostile to the Ṣaffārids has preserved the historical memory, confirmed by other, earlier sources, that Tāhirid and caliphal control were at a nadir in Khurāsān at this time.¹¹

It cannot be emphasized enough that Caliphal control was at this point at a nadir not only in Khurāsān, but everywhere: the caliphs were virtual prisoners of the overmighty Turkish soldiery, and the nine years between 861 and 870 witnessed the murders of four caliphs in succession. There was, in other words, not only no effectual government in Khurāsān, but not even any overlord to whom to turn in order to intervene. The problem of the Khārijites in particular, which

⁸ Bosworth, *The Ṣaffārids*, pp. 108-109.

⁹ Ibn Isfandiyār, *Tārīkh-i Ṭabaristān*, p. 245. *Runūd* – another under-researched term – is conventionally held to have been a pejorative designation: “thief” or “vagabond.” Note again, as we saw with the word “ayyar” in Chapter 1, however, the element of errancy or wandering implied in the latter definition.

¹⁰ Even the most cursory reading of the great chronicles covering this period will show that the ‘ayyārs were actively involved in the sectarian civil wars between the *Sunna* and the *Shī‘a* at this time, on the Sunni side. For a discussion of the phenomenon in late Buyid times, see *infra*, Chapter 8.

¹¹ In fact, the only source which does not make a derogatory comment in reference to Muḥammad b. Tāhir’s abilities is the *Tārīkh sinī mulūk al-ard*, which does, however, mention several of the rebellions raging in his territories (p. 170).

certainly did not respect provincial borders, therefore became Ya‘qūb’s by default.

Ya‘qūb was apparently reluctant to intervene in the neighboring province; for, although he must surely have noticed the turmoil next door from the time of his accession to the governorship of Sīstān, it was not until 253/867, as an extension of his anti-Khārijite campaigns in nearby areas, that Ya‘qūb made any incursions into Khurāsān proper. In 253/867, however, Ya‘qūb invaded Herāt, where “he gave security and safety to the people of Herāt, so that they set their hearts upon him,” then defeated the Tāhirid general sent to fight him.¹² Muḥammad b. Tāhir then sent messengers with a letter and gifts to Ya‘qūb, together with the patent for Sīstān, Kābul, Kirmān and Fārs and a robe of honour; “and Ya‘qūb was patient [ārām girif] and returned [to Sīstān].”¹³

The mention of Ya‘qūb’s patience here naturally raises the question: patient with what? Our hypothesis is that Ya‘qūb was giving yet another chance to the Tāhirids. Apparently, they had asked him to leave Herāt – and the historical fact is that he promptly complied with the Tāhirids’ request, despite his having just defeated their army; no obstacle stood in the way of his assuming direct control of the area at this point – yet he did not. Nor did he appoint a governor of his own, either; the local history of Herāt squarely places Ya‘qūb’s assumption of full control of the city in 256/870.¹⁴

This is hardly the behaviour of an unscrupulous expansionist; there is no evidence that Muḥammad b. Tāhir had the military capacity to enforce his request in 867.¹⁵ On the contrary, we are specifically told (by an anti-Šaffārid source, no less) that Muḥammad b. Tāhir was too weak to confront Ya‘qūb, and that he therefore sent him to Kirmān in the hope of then being able to betray and depose Ya‘qūb in his home base of Sīstān while the latter was away fighting Khārijites in Kirmān:

After two years [Ya‘qūb] gained mastery over the rulership of Herāt. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Tāhir b. ‘Abdallāh b. Tāhir Dhū al-Yaminayn was the governor of Khurāsān. In himself he had no power to resist [Ya‘qūb]. He wanted [therefore] to overcome him by ruse, which [intention] he arrived at due to the waxing of Ya‘qūb’s fortune [dawla].¹⁶ Muḥammad sent Aḥmad b. Tāhir to Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth with a friendly message, and gave him the government of Kirmān so that in the absence of Ya‘qūb, perhaps he could liberate Sīstān. Ya‘qūb was glad of this ... [and] he went and freed Kirmān. Muḥammad

¹² *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 208.

¹³ *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 209.

¹⁴ Mu‘īn al-Dīn Muḥammad Zamchī al-Isfizārī, *Rawdāt al-jannāt fi-awṣaf madīnat Harāt*, ed. Sayyid Muḥammad Kāzīm Imām, Tehran, 1338/1959, vol. 1, p. 383.

¹⁵ *Pace Rawdat al-safā’* (vol. 4, p. 11), which claims not only that Ya‘qūb apparently invaded Khurāsān at some earlier point (no date is given, but this alleged incident clearly occurred before 253/867, because that latter date is given afterwards as the time when he conquered Herāt and then Kirmān), but also that Ya‘qūb retreated because he had “no choice.”

¹⁶ *Dawla* is another tricky word to translate; it could mean “turn [of the wheel of Fortune],” or simply “dynasty.” For a discussion of the term see M. Sharon, *Black Banners*, pp. 19-27.

Tāhir, in the absence of Ya‘qūb, sent an amīr named Qāsim with a great army to liberate Sīstān.¹⁷

This unique account goes on to say that Ya‘qūb defeated the Tāhirid army. While it is not at all certain that the factual occurrences happened precisely as stated (this is the only source to claim that the Tāhirids attempted to overthrow Ya‘qūb militarily in Sīstān while he was away doing their bidding in Kirmān, and it is a late one),¹⁸ what is important here is the writer’s understanding that Ya‘qūb was stronger than the Tāhirid ruler, and that the latter did not like this fact, and was therefore scheming against Ya‘qūb.¹⁹

According to an even more intriguing tradition, Ya‘qūb restored – or at least freed, in obedience to Caliphal orders, the Tāhirids of this area whom he had taken prisoner in the fray:

The Amīr of Khurāsān at this time [253/867] was Muḥammad b. Tāhir b. ‘Abdallāh b. Tāhir b. al-Ḥusayn al-Khuza‘ī, and his representative over [Herāt and Būshan] was Muḥammad b. Aws al-Anbārī. [The latter] went out to fight [Ya‘qūb] with a mobilization [*ta‘bi‘a*], [with] great courage, and fine attire. His battle went well until Ya‘qūb employed stratagems upon him, and interposed between him and the entrance to the city, which was Būshan. [Then] Muḥammad b. Aws withdrew, defeated. It is said: No one battled [Ya‘qūb] with a better fight than Muḥammad b. Aws. Ya‘qūb entered Būshan and Herāt, and these two cities passed into his hands. He [also] vanquished a group of the Tāhiriyā, who were related to Tāhir b. al-Ḥusayn al-Khuza‘ī, and he carried them [away] to Sijistān, whereupon the Caliph al-Mu‘tazz Billāh sent to him [someone] known as Ibn Bal‘am, a Shī‘ite man, with a message and a letter, so he freed them.²⁰

One can only imagine what Ya‘qūb, if he was indeed, as the sources declare, a Sunni holy warrior, must have felt upon receiving a Shī‘ite as the emissary of the Sunni caliph. In any case, it is instructive that Ya‘qūb left Herāt in obedience to Tāhirid – or caliphal – wishes. Ya‘qūb is said to have sent, before departing, a letter to the Sīstānī religious figure ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān,²¹ ordering him to recite the prayers and *khuṭba* for Ya‘qūb, which he did for three Fridays in Ya‘qūb’s absence.²² This episode provides the first instance – it will be far from the last – of

¹⁷ Qazvīnī, *Tārikh-i guzīda*, p. 371.

¹⁸ Other writers, such as Ibn Khallikān (*Wafayāt al-āyān*, vol. 5, p. 346), say that the Tāhirids sent an army to battle Ya‘qūb in the Herāt area at the time of his conquest of it.

¹⁹ In this context, the following words are apposite: “Even when the account gives every indication of being fanciful, there is beneath the story line the kernel of an historical truth which awaits extrapolation. As a rule medieval historians seldom invented traditions out of whole cloth; they preferred instead to weave strands of historical fact into a larger fabric of their own making. In such fashion they seemed to authenticate their creations by drawing upon still vivid historical memories.” J. Lassner, “Propaganda in Early Islām: The ‘Abbāsids in the Post-Revolutionary Age,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 10 (1980), pp. 82-83. There are, of course, certain verifiable elements in this account which are confirmed by other sources – for instance, that “Muhammad Tāhirī fell into drink and rule passed from him.”

²⁰ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-āyān*, vol. 5, p. 346.

²¹ On this important figure, see *infra*.

²² *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 209.

Ya‘qūb’s close personal cooperation with the most reputable orthodox religious figures.

Ya‘qūb’s first action upon returning to Sīstān was to kill some of the remaining Khārijites and seize their property; we are told that the first poems composed in his honor were related to this incident. Four poems are cited in this connection in the *Tārikh-i Sīstān*; these poems are very unusual for panegyrics in that they emphasize, not military prowess, but rather the religious nature of Ya‘qūb’s rule. “Religion” does not in this case mean God as legitimizer of the dynasty, which is in fact a common theme in panegyrics,²³ but rather religion in a much deeper sense. The very first poem given (the only Arabic one) runs as follows:

God has honoured the people of [both] town and country/ With the rulership of Ya‘qūb, possessor of excellence²⁴ and provisions/ His honor and his generosity have made people safe/ A shield from God upon the cities and the country.²⁵

Ya‘qūb is being described as a God-sent protector, not just an outstanding ruler – a “shield of God.”

The last two encomiastic poems given at this point in the same source are even more emphatic about Ya‘qūb’s religious merits. One of those two was composed by a reformed Khārijite:

Anyone who is not suspect in his heart says “yes” as a result of your *da‘awā*²⁶/ Life was cut away from ‘Ammār because the bold one opposed [you] until of necessity [or: consequently]/ he saw affliction, in his own body and soul; he walked about in the world, his body in anguish./ God made Mecca sacred to the Arabs/ He has made your covenant²⁷ sacred in the non-Arab lands [‘ajam]/ all who entered into it remained living; those who did not see this as holy, on the contrary, were annihilated.²⁸

²³ Although the second paean’s most salient lines do use God in such a fashion, stating that “From all eternity writing has stood upon the tablet [upon which God writes his decrees]: give rulership to Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth the great ruler,” *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 210. Lazard translates this last word, *humām*, as “hero.” (G. Lazard, *Les premiers poètes persans IXe-Xe siècles: fragments rassemblés, édités, et traduits*, Tehran, 1964, vol. 1, p. 54).

²⁴ *Dhīl-ifḍāl*. The latter word can also signify “doing good.”

²⁵ *Tārikh-i Sīstān, loc. cit.* The text of this poem, as noted by Bahār, is corrupt. The author wishes to thank Wolfhart Heinrichs for helping to decipher the meaning of the problematic lines.

²⁶ This word is of course, as noted *supra*, religiously loaded.

²⁷ *‘abd*. This could equally well mean “promise” or simply “time; period of time.” The sense of a covenant or promise, however, is probably more fitting as a partner to the word *da‘wa*; an oath or a covenant with Ya‘qūb would be held sacred.

²⁸ *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, pp. 211-212. Lazard has translated the last line as “Those who enter into it [i. e. the covenant] have won eternity – and those who ignore it have fallen back into nothingness (sont retombés au néant).” (Lazard, *Les premiers poètes persans*, vol. 1, p. 57). These poems quite probably constitute the earliest Persian poetry; the significance of this for Persian was quite inexplicably overlooked by Frye, “The New Persian Renaissance in Western Iran,” *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honour of Hamilton A. R. Gibb*, ed. George Makdisi, Leiden, 1965, pp. 225 – 231, and *idem*. “The Sāmānids,” *Cambridge History of Iran* IV,

Here, of course, Ya‘qūb’s mission is explicitly described as *sacred*. This choice is significant if only because it shows that the people writing poems for Ya‘qūb believed, presumably, that they would please him far more by talking about the sacred than about, say, the glorious; it conveys something of the atmosphere surrounding him.

This emphasis upon the sacred is even more apparent in the last poem of the series, which was obviously a piece of flattery. Again, though, how it chooses to flatter is significant, because in order to be successful flattery must be applied in an area that is of interest to its object: this poem describes Ya‘qūb himself, not as glorious, or magnificent, or generous, or puissant, but as a redoubtable warrior in the Prophet’s cause. Thus, the poem reveals what a court sycophant thought Ya‘qūb valued, and what he perceived Ya‘qūb’s aims to have been at that time – and his perceptions corroborate the holy warrior interpretation of Ya‘qūb. In Gold’s translation, this poem runs as follows:

Eve gave birth to no one, and Adam sired no one, with a lion’s heart and a majestic nature such as yours. / You are the miracle of the Prophet of Mecca in deed, in thought, and in word. / And the Great Day will come, when ‘Ammār will boast: “I am the one who was [honored by being] killed by Ya‘qūb.”²⁹

Thus lauded, Ya‘qūb set out on his mission to Kirmān and Fārs. Although final Saffārid conquest of the latter province – and coinage from there³⁰ – date only from 264/877f, the incorporation of Fārs was a long-drawn-out process which contradicts the common image of Ya‘qūb as a land-hungry, cynical self-aggrandizer. The conquest of Fārs in a sense developed from the continuing low-grade warfare in Kirmān. Both *ghāzī* ideology and concern for Kirmān’s negative influence upon the stability of neighbouring Sistān can plausibly be seen to have motivated clashes in Kirmān long before the Caliph or the Tāhirids appointed Ya‘qūb to take control of either of the two provinces.

We know from the geographers that there was a Khārijite problem in Kirmān.³¹ Equally, we know that the people of certain areas of Kirmān were “cutting off the roads” in Kirmān and the Sistānī desert.³² Indeed, Bosworth says (without, however, drawing the present author’s conclusions): “It was with the aims of reducing banditry and attacks on travelers by the mountain folk of Jabal Bāriz, in eastern Kirmān, … that Ya‘qūb … led punitive raids thither … The Jabal Bāriz was only imperfectly Islamized and Zoroastrianism lingered on there.”³³ Another scholar

pp. 144-148. In the latter work, Frye’s blind spot toward the Saffārids extends to the administrative and institutional spheres as well.

²⁹ Milton Gold, *The Tārikh-i Sistān*, p. 168.

³⁰ See D. G. Tor, “Numismatic History.”

³¹ E. g. Ibn Hawqal, *Kitāb šūrat al-ard*, vol. 2, p. 325.

³² Al-İştakhrī, *Kitāb masālik al-mamālik*, pp. 163-164.

³³ Bosworth, *The Saffārids*, p. 143. According to Mary Boyce, Zoroastrianism remained the dominant faith in Iran until well into the ninth century, after which time “the only places where Zoroastrians succeeded in maintaining themselves in any numbers were in and

has characterized the Kirmāni campaign even more clearly as religiously motivated: “Ya‘qūb the Coppersmith waged a war of extermination against the Khārijites of Kirmān ...”³⁴ This latter characterization is more in line with at least one of our earliest sources, which speaks in the most plainly religious terms: it says that Ya‘qūb and ‘Amr conducted *ghazwas* there.³⁵

Fārs was equally troubled for many years before Ṣaffārid involvement began there; already under the year 231/845f we are told of ineffectual caliphal attempts to subdue malefactors in the province: “In [this year] Waṣif the Turk³⁶ arrived from the areas of Isfahān, al-Jibāl, and Fārs; he had gone in pursuit of the Kurds [*al-Akrād*] because they had been causing mischief in these areas.”³⁷ In fact, it seems as though no one was really in firm control of the two provinces until Ya‘qūb was sent there. Just who precisely sent him is a matter of some dispute, which we shall deal with presently.

The situation in Fārs during the 860s was undeniably turbulent:

The army of Fārs in this year [249/863] rose up against their governor al-Ḥusayn b. Khālid, rioted against him, and fell upon the money which he had brought, taking their pay from it. Their leader was ‘Ali b. al-Ḥusayn b. Quraysh al-Bukhārī. Fārs [at this time] was attached to Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir; when the news [of the rebellion] reached him he appointed as governor ‘Abdallāh b. Ishāq, who started out for [Fārs] with equipment and numbers [of soldiers], and when he neared it the army gave him their obedience. [‘Abdallāh b. Ishāq’s] aim was Ibn Quraysh, for he abhorred him; [but] then he was satisfied with him, and appointed him to fight a group of the Khārijites in the area of Fursh and Rudhān, on the border between Fārs and Kirmān. So Ibn Quraysh went to the area of Iṣṭakhrī, [where he] wrote to the army and informed them that he was rebelling against ‘Abdallāh b. Ishāq, and they supported him in this because of the bad behaviour of ‘Abdallāh toward them, for he withheld their pay from them. [Then] ‘Ali b. al-Ḥusayn returned and attacked him, drove him out of his house, and seized his money and his possessions. Then they made ‘Ali b. al-Ḥusayn Amīr over them, [so] ‘Abdallāh retreated to Baghdād, betaking himself to Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. Naṣr b. Ḥamza al-Khuza‘ī. When the troops of ‘Ali b. al-Ḥusayn drew near, he did not make peace, but continued to avoid him in the rural districts of Fārs ... [Meanwhile] the rule of Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth al-Ṣaffār [in Sistān] grew strong, and he went to Fārs [in 254/868];

around Yazd and Kirmān.” (M. Boyce, *A Persian Stronghold of Zoroastrianism*, Oxford, 1977, p. 1). Iṣṭakhrī, too, notes that the area around Jabal Bāriz remained completely Zoroastrian until well into ‘Abbāsid times, and that its inhabitants were “evildoers” (*Masālik al-mamālik*, p. 164).

³⁴ William Thomson, “Khārijitism and the Khārijites,” p. 379.

³⁵ Shams al-Din Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Ahmad b. Abī Bakr al-Muqaddasī, *Ahsan al-taṣāṣim fi ma‘rifat al-aqāḍim*, ed. M. J. De Goeje, *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, vol. 3, Leiden, 1906, p. 471.

³⁶ One of the major Turkish strongmen controlling the caliphate during this period.

³⁷ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 23. Defining these “Kurds” is a problem. Minorsky, “The *Guran*,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 11:1 (1943), p. 75, long since pointed out that “The vague and indiscriminate use of the term *Kurd* goes back to early times ... Arab and Persian authors of the tenth century A. D. mean by *Kurds* any Iranian nomads of Western Persia, such as the tent-dwellers of Fārs.”

‘Ali b. al-Husayn b. Quraysh had gained mastery over [the province], but he [Ya‘qūb] defeated his army, imprisoned him, and gained mastery over Fārs.³⁸

The above narrative, although it does not enlighten the reader as to how or why Ya‘qūb went to Fārs and Kirmān, does inform us of the confusion rife in the area at the time, and that the person whom he set out to fight and defeat was not the province’s appointed governor, but a usurper who had already overthrown the Tāhirid representative. Note, also, that whereas the turmoil in Fārs began in 249/863, it was not until 254/868 that Ya‘qūb finally intervened; in this case, at least, he cannot be accused of pouncing on the first timely pretext for intervention.

In fact, other sources inform us that Ya‘qūb went on his Kirmān-Fārs expedition only at the explicit behest of the Caliph. According to Ṭabarī, in the year 255/869, when Ya‘qūb was busy fighting in the Herāt area, he was sent the patent to Kirmān and Fārs by the Caliph.³⁹ Unbeknownst to him, the Caliph had also sent the very same patent to the governor of Fārs,⁴⁰ either because he was deliberately trying to set the two men against one another (as Ṭabarī claims), or simply because he was hoping that if he threw enough people at the problems in Kirmān and Fārs, sooner or later someone would successfully manage to control those places.

As soon as Ya‘qūb finished his Herāt operations, therefore, he turned first toward Kirmān, where he clashed with and defeated the general of ‘Ali b. al-Husayn, after which he proceeded toward Fārs. His march into Fārs, therefore, was not an act of anti-‘Abbāsid aggression; he held a caliphal patent for it. Other writers confirm this as well:

In [this year – 255/869] Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth al-Saffār took possession of Kirmān, the reason for this being that ‘Ali b. al-Husayn was ruling over Fārs, and he wrote to al-Mu‘tazz asking for Kirmān, describing the failure of the Tāhirids, and how Ya‘qūb had taken possession of Sijistān. [Now] ‘Ali b. al-Husayn was slow in remitting the *kharāj* of Fārs, so al-Mu‘tazz wrote to him [giving him] the governorship of Kirmān, and wrote [simultaneously] to Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth giving him the governorship also, [thus] seeking to incite each of them against the other in order to remove the trouble of the loser from him, [thereby] remaining with only the other. Each one of the two professed obedience which did not really exist, and al-Mu‘tazz knew this of them.⁴¹

³⁸ Al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta‘rīkh*, pp. 497-498; continuation on p. 504. A very brief mention of this can be found in İştakhrī, *Kitāb masālik al-mamālik*, p. 144.

³⁹ The entire episode can be found in Ṭabarī, *op. cit.*, vol. 9, pp. 382-386; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 191-194; according to *Tārīkh-i Sīstān* (p. 106) it was Muḥammad b. Tāhir, rather than the caliph, who invested Ya‘qūb in 255/869 with the province of Fārs.

⁴⁰ Ṭabarī refers to ‘Ali b. al-Husayn as the “governor on behalf of the Tāhirids,” but as we have just seen from the only source contemporaneous with the events, ‘Ali b. al-Husayn had actually rebelled against and expelled the Tāhirid representative.

⁴¹ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 191; Ṭabarī, *Ta‘rīkh*, vol. 9, p. 382.

Although the source is obviously skeptical regarding Ya‘qūb’s loyalty toward al-Mu‘tazz,⁴² it positively asserts that Ya‘qūb was – albeit in bad faith – assigned the task of governing at least Kirmān. Ibn al-Athīr goes on to detail how ‘Alī b. al-Husayn’s general barricaded himself in the capital city, refusing to emerge and fight the redoubtable Ya‘qūb. The latter thereupon used his cunning⁴³ to lure ‘Alī b. al-Husayn’s general into battle, in which Ya‘qūb won a resounding victory.⁴⁴

There is an anecdote told in this context which serves to illuminate the somewhat grim and fanatical devotion of Ya‘qūb to his cause. According to this story, while Ya‘qūb was shackling the opposing commander with the fetters that had been intended for the Ṣaffārid leader, he noticed a wound upon the man’s arm.

[Ya‘qūb] said to him: ‘What is this, O Ṭawq?’⁴⁵ [Ṭawq] replied: ‘May God prosper the Amīr! I found it to be hot so I opened a vein.’ [Ya‘qūb] called to someone who was with him and ordered him to remove his boot from his foot. He did so; and when he had pulled it off of [Ya‘qūb’s] foot crumbs of dry bread scattered from the boot. [Ya‘qūb] said: ‘O Ṭawq! This boot of mine has not left my foot for two months, [with] the bread inside it from which I ate; and I did not weigh down a bed [viz. Ya‘qūb had not slept in a bed for two months], while you sat in drink and entertainment! With such preparation you wished to fight me and wage war against me?’ ... Then he entered Kirmān and gained possession of it, and it became one of his provinces together with Sijistān.⁴⁶

Once again, the image being depicted accords well with the *mutaṭawwī*⁴⁷ interpretation of Ya‘qūb.

After conquering Kirmān Ya‘qūb then proceeded to take Fārs; as we saw, according to at least two of the most reliable sources, at explicit Caliphal or Tāhirid command. But even if Ya‘qūb had not held the patent for Fārs, it would have been consistent with freelance *mutaṭawwī*⁴⁸ behaviour if he had at this point battled the governor of Fārs anyway. The governor of Fārs had not only, so far as Ya‘qūb was concerned, clearly attacked him and attempted to wrest Kirmān from him against caliphal wishes; he had, far more importantly, outraged pious Muslims by his violent and unjust practices.⁴⁹ Ibn Khallikān has Ya‘qūb say of this governor:

⁴² As well it might be, considering that even that caliph’s closest associates evinced scant loyalty toward him. Al-Mu‘tazz, at just about precisely the same time that Ya‘qūb was conquering Fārs, was, according to Ṭabarī, first deposed by his own officers after his mother had refused to supply him with the funds to buy his own life and safety, then deprived of food and water for three days, and finally closed up alive into a vault; it is unclear whether he was killed by thirst or by suffocation. Anyone who had actually been loyal to al-Mu‘tazz would certainly have constituted a startling exception, considering that even the caliph’s own mother was not so.

⁴³ A most ‘ayyār-ish quality; see Chapter 1, *supra*, for this trait’s inclusion in the medieval dictionary definitions.

⁴⁴ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 192.

⁴⁵ Ya‘qūb’s question would seem to imply that commanders were not to be hurt in the fray.

⁴⁶ Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 9, pp. 383-384.

⁴⁷ A point already noted by Bosworth, *The Ṣaffārids*, p. 145.

What do you think about a Muslim who brings infidel Kurds⁴⁸ into the country of the Muslims, for the purpose of killing them [i. e. the Muslims], carrying off their women and taking their possessions? Do you not know that Ahmad b. al-Layth al-Kurdi killed seven hundred men in Kirmān ... that the Kurds deflowered two hundred virgins of the leading families and carried away with them to their country more than two thousand women? Have you ever seen a Muslim who would sanction this?⁴⁹

It should also be noted that even some of the accounts which cast aspersions on Ya‘qūb’s takeover of these areas note and commend his holy warrior persona. For instance, when, according to one account, Ya‘qūb was addressed by the chief of the spy network and the leading notables in the province [*sāhib al-barīd wa-wujūh al-balad*] (probably at the behest of the ruler, assuming this story to be historically accurate), and asked **not** to take over the province, those same people commended Ya‘qūb for his fighting in the cause of religion:

The chief of intelligence and the leading notables of the province wrote to Ya‘qūb, informing him that he must not – despite the [qualities] which God had bestowed upon him of volunteer fighting for religion [*taṭawwūf*] and religiosity [*diyāna*], and killing of Khārijites, expelling them from the lands of Khurāsān and Sijistān – hasten to spill blood, because ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn would not give up the province except by a letter [of appointment] from the Caliph.⁵⁰

Here we see revealed once again the image Ya‘qūb apparently had in the eyes of his contemporaries and those whom he ruled: the *mutatawwi‘ī* man of religion who battled heretics. This depiction of his reputation as such is particularly interesting in the context of a tradition such as this, which is clearly meant to be a negative one (i. e. Ya‘qūb acts without caliphal orders and against the express wishes of leading notables). It thus seems as though Ya‘qūb’s reputation for religiosity and *taṭawwūf* must have been a rather strong one, to the point where even those who were not his partisans – and, if this tradition is a fabricated one, even to the point where his most zealous and creative detractors – still had to acknowledge those qualities in him.

While Ya‘qūb was approaching the province, ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn, the aforementioned governor of Fārs, immediately barricaded himself in a narrow defile near Shīrāz, protected on one side by a mountain and on the other by a river “non-fordable by walking or wading,” while he awaited Ya‘qūb’s approach.⁵¹ Ya‘qūb managed to overcome that particular obstacle, however, in a resourceful fash-

⁴⁸ On the “Kurds,” see *supra*. Note that according to Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 193–194, ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn’s forces consisted largely of these “Kurds.”

⁴⁹ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-ā‘yān*, vol. 5, p. 349.

⁵⁰ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-ā‘yān*, vol. 5, p. 349.

⁵¹ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 192–193. This passage is a bit clearer in Ibn al-Athīr than the version appearing in Ṭabarī; Ibn al-Athīr employs the word *madīq* (which Lane translates as “a narrow, or strait place” instead of Ṭabarī’s *kurr*, which Saliba takes to mean “reservoir.”

ion,⁵² successfully bringing his army to the other side of the water, where Ya‘qūb won the battle and pushed on to Shīrāz that same night. His actions following the conquest of Shīrāz were notable for several reasons. First, he and his soldiers are said to have looted only the houses of ‘Alī and his companions, and not to have touched anything else (other than to collect the *kharāj*, the religiously sanctioned taxation). Second, they then turned around and returned to Sīstān. Such activity hardly qualifies for the epithet bestowed upon it by Nöldeke – a “robber’s raid.”⁵³

Ibn al-Athīr goes on to add information, not found in other sources, which sheds additional light on Ya‘qūb’s character. According to him, there was a terrible slaughter of ‘Alī’s fleeing troops; “but when Ya‘qūb saw the killing with which they had met, he ordered [his soldiers] to forbear from them, and if not for that they would have been killed down to the last man ...”⁵⁴ Thus we see Ya‘qūb attempting to enforce religious precepts regarding proper behavior in warfare, either from conviction or political expediency.⁵⁵

Moreover, his activities after entering Shīrāz, as described in the same source, also conform with the previous depiction of Ya‘qūb as a good Islamic ruler, who limits his torments to evil-doers and observes proper relations with the caliphs:

... Al-Ṣaffār entered Shīrāz, and went around the town, proclaiming the peace, [so that] the people felt secure.⁵⁶ He tortured ‘Alī with all kinds of tortures, taking from him 10,000,000 dirhams – it is [also] said 4,000,000 dirhams – weapons and horses, and unlimited additional [booty]. [He] then wrote to the caliph [tendering] his obedience, and sent to him a splendid present, including ten falcon’s eggs, a piebald Chinese falcon, a hundred musks and other rare things apart from these, and returned to Sījistān

⁵² By having his army swim the river naked, following the course of a dog Ya‘qūb had thrown into the water in order to observe its passage across. Tabārī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 9, pp. 385–386. Confirmed in its general outline by al-İṣṭakhri, *Kitāb al-masālik al-mamālik*, p. 144.

⁵³ Th. Nöldeke, “Yakub the Coppersmith and his Dynasty,” p. 181. Contrast Ya‘qūb’s restrained behavior, and the historiographical characterization of this behavior, with, for instance, the indiscriminate and wholesale destruction wreaked by the troops of the Saljuq Sultān Ṭoghribil Beg whenever they conquered a Muslim city; nevertheless Ṭoghribil Beg, in contrast to Ya‘qūb, received a reputation for Sunni piety. Yet Ibn al-Athīr states in his eulogy of Ṭoghribil Beg that “His army used to rob people of their possessions; they freely engaged in this [lit. : “their hands were free in this”] day and night.” (*al-Kāmil*, vol. 10, p. 28).

⁵⁴ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 194.

⁵⁵ According to one later source, as a result of this killing “the pious [al-*sulāhā*] wrote to him condemning him for his hastening in shedding blood.” (Dhahabī, *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā*’, vol. 12, p. 514) Even if this is a statement intended to condemn Ya‘qūb by attributing the slaughter of the troops to Ya‘qūb’s orders or wishes, the very fact that such people dared to communicate with him and even express their disappointment, is a strong statement in favour of his piety. Dhahabī himself notes that Ya‘qūb, despite what this letter implies, scrupulously guarded the safety and property of the people of Shīrāz, and took only the property of the governor before departing. He adds, moreover, that the Caliph al-Mu‘tamid was perfectly satisfied with him after receiving generous gifts.

⁵⁶ *Aḥma’anna l-nās*; the word is Qur’ānic (e. g. 22:11; 4:103).

with 'Ali and Tawq upon the victory; and when he had left the province of Fārs the Caliph sent his governors there.⁵⁷

Again, this is not the behaviour of a ruffian – quite the opposite, in fact. Ya'qūb is depicted as having been concerned with protecting the innocent to an extent unusual among medieval rulers; obviously, such behaviour accords far better with the holy-warrior paradigm than with the ruffian one. It is also significant that Ya'qūb did not at this point declare himself the ruler of Fārs, despite the caliphal patent he held and his military victory there, both of which would have provided a convenient pretext for doing so. Yet what actually happened was that Ya'qūb went into Fārs, put the province in order, did not have himself named governor there, and then marched home again immediately, leaving the Caliph to appoint whom he would as governor. This behaviour once again directly contravenes Nöldeke's characterization of Yaqūb's career and motivation.

Even negatively slanted sources acknowledge Ya'qūb's willing withdrawal from Fārs; Mīrkhwānd, for instance, after stating that Ya'qūb successfully invaded Fārs, recounts that Ya'qūb sent magnificent presents to Baghdād, together with a message to the Caliph declaring his own obedience, and then simply returned to Sīstān. There is no hint that Ya'qūb required a caliphal request to make him do so.⁵⁸ In fact, he was far more interested in continuing his holy war in the East; he soon after marched into Zābulistān to fight the rebellious son of the Zunbīl, whom he pursued until heavy snowfall in the Kābul area cut short his campaign. As a result of this campaign

Ya'qūb ... sent a messenger to Mu'tamid with gifts and fifty gold and silver idols which he had taken from Kābul ... for [al-Mu'tamid] to send to Mecca so that for the honor of Mecca, according to the custom of the people, they would throw them down to spite the infidels.⁵⁹

Al-Mu'tamid in turn was said to have been pleased, and sent Ya'qūb patents for Balkh, Tukhāristān, Fārs, Kirmān, Sijistān, and the Indus valley.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 194-195. Ṭabarī also has the sending of gifts, *Ta'rīkh*, vol. 9, pp. 381-382, as does *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 214. The eleventh-century work *Kitāb al-dhakha'ir wa'l-tuhaf* (attributed to al-Qādī Ahmad b. al-Rashīd b. al-Zubayr, ed. M. Hamīd Allāh, Kuwait, 1959), p. 39, describes the gift slightly differently: "Ya'qūb b. al-Layth al-Ṣaffār gave al-Mu'tamid 'alā'llāh a gift containing ten gyrfalcons, one of them piebald, the like of which no one had ever seen; a hundred workhorses; twenty boxes carried on ten mules containing specialties [or curiosities] and exotic objects from China; a silver mosque with bolts in which fifteen people could pray; a hundred *mann* of musk; a hundred *mann* of Indian aloeswood; and four million dirham [coins]," in the translation of Ghāda al-Hijjāwī al-Qaddūmī (*The Book of Gifts and Rarities*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996, p. 85).

⁵⁸ *Rawdat al-ṣafā'*, vol. 4, p. 12.

⁵⁹ *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 216.

⁶⁰ *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 216. Ṭabarī (*Ta'rīkh*, vol. 9, p. 382; see also Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 191) mentions only Kirmān, from which Bosworth (*The Saffārids*, p. 148) deduces that the Caliph must have stipulated that Ya'qūb withdraw from the province of Fārs; there is, however, no evidence for this assertion. We are told merely that "when [Ya'qūb] left the land of Fārs the Caliph sent his administrative representatives ['ummāl] to it [Fārs]," not

But Ya‘qūb was soon forced to realize that he had left a dangerous power vacuum in Fārs; the caliph did not have the necessary force and authority to shore up his officials’ rule. Indeed, already in the following year, 256/870, an at least erstwhile Khārijite, Muḥammad b. Wāṣil, allied himself with the leader of the notorious Kurds, killed the caliphal governor of Fārs and usurped the province.⁶¹

A little background on Muḥammad b. Wāṣil, who had a long history of disruptive behaviour, is necessary in order to understand just what kind of problem his usurpation of Fārs posed for the Ṣaffārids. In the *Tārikh-i Sīstān* we are informed that already in the year 222/837 Ibn Wāṣil had been causing trouble in Sīstān. Around the year 221/835-836, there was a Khārijite revolt in Bust, eventually defeated. Muḥammad b. Wāṣil apparently rallied those defeated Khārijite forces to lead his own revolt the following year, and managed to defeat in battle and take prisoner the son of the governor (who was also commanding the army that had been sent against Ibn Wāṣil).⁶² Muḥammad b. Wāṣil, after negotiations, eventually released the governor’s son, and then disappears from our sources until resurfacing in Kirmān, to where, we are previously told, the Khārijite fugitives had fled at this time. Thus, Muḥammad b. Wāṣil had probably had connections with Khārijites in Kirmān and Fārs at least since 222/837.

Ya‘qūb accordingly marched toward Fārs in 257/870f., but Muḥammad b. Wāṣil, together with his Kurdish ally, hastened to Ya‘qūb’s camp in order to pay homage and probably to give assurances of his good behaviour. According to one source, Ya‘qūb confirmed him as governor.⁶³ Ya‘qūb was able to do this because the caliph had sent him at this time, once again, the investiture patents for Balkh, Tukharistān,⁶⁴ Fārs, Kirmān, Sīstān and Sind.⁶⁵ Perhaps al-Mu‘tamid, also, had realized that he was too weak to control those provinces himself. According

whose initiative it was for Ya‘qub to leave the province (Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 195).

⁶¹ Ṭabarī, *op. cit.*, vol. 9, p. 474; Bosworth, *The Ṣaffārids*, p. 147, describes Ibn Wāṣil as “renouncing caliphal authority,” on the basis of Ṭabarī’s statement that “in this year [257/871] Muḥammad b. Wāṣil disobeyed the caliph in Fārs, and conquered it [i. e. the province].” Cf. Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 257.

⁶² *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 188.

⁶³ We have already seen previously that Ya‘qūb was clement toward repentant renegades. In this he was, again, following Muslim religious practice; see J. L. Kraemer, “Apostates, Rebels and Brigands,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 10 (1980), pp. 34-73.

⁶⁴ The district immediately south of the Oxus river, in the nothernmost part of today’s Afghanistan. Balkh was this area’s most important city. Barthold, *An Historical Geography of Iran*, tr. S. Soucek, ed. C. E. Bosworth, Princeton, 1984, ch. 1, *passim*.

⁶⁵ *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 216. “Sind” refers to the area of the lower Indus, to the east of Balūchistān, located in today’s Pakistan. (See H. T. Lambrick, *Sind: A General Introduction*, Hyderabad, 1975, which contains not only fairly comprehensive geographical information and a condensed history of the province, but also several detailed maps of Sind during various periods). This is in direct contrast to the account in *Rawdat al-ṣafā*, according to which the caliph sent Ya‘qūb a message angrily demanding to know why he keeps invading Fārs (vol. 4, p. 12).

to our other sources, however, Ya‘qūb had apparently directed Muḥammad b. Wāṣil to submit to the Caliph; thus we read that by 258/872, Muḥammad b. Wāṣil, the erstwhile Khārijite, made his peace with the Caliph and handed over the province to a caliphal governor.⁶⁶

Ya‘qūb thereupon returned promptly to his *ghāzī* campaigns: first toward Kābul, where he captured the Zunbīl (son of the former Zunbīl);⁶⁷ and then toward Khurāsān, where he set off to fight anti-Khārijite and anti-Shī‘ite campaigns. Ya‘qūb marched first to Balkh, in the possession of which he had just been confirmed by the Caliph, and from there to Herāt, in which area a Khārijite had declared himself counter-caliph:

‘Abd al-Rahmān the Khārijī made an insurrection from Mount Karūkh, giving himself the title *amīr al-mu’mīn* and the *laqab al-Mutawakkil ‘alā’llāh*; gathering to himself 10,000 men from among the Khawārij, [he] occupied the mountains of Herāt and Isfīzār,⁶⁸ took [many] areas in Khurāsān, and continually launched assaults. The army commanders and the notables of Khurāsān were powerless before him.⁶⁹

According to Ṭabarī, Ya‘qūb killed this man and sent his head to the caliph with a note stating: “This is the head of God’s enemy ‘Abd al-Rahmān the Khārijite in Herāt, who for thirty [sic] years falsely pretended to the caliphate; Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth killed him.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 9, p. 490; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 257.

⁶⁷ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 216; *Rawḍat al-ṣafār*, vol. 4, p. 12. See also Forstner, “Ya‘qūb b. Lāt und der Zunbīl,” *passim*.

⁶⁸ A district “three days’ march from [Herāt] ... which belonged to the province of Harāt.” Barthold, *An Historical Geography of Iran*, p. 64.

⁶⁹ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 217; note that Milton Gold’s translation is inexact here. (*The Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, pp. 172–173)

⁷⁰ Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 9, p. 507. A story in the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, however (*Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, pp. 217–218), uniquely maintains that ‘Abd al-Rahmān voluntarily repented, renouncing his former behaviour and coming as a supplicant to Ya‘qūb, whereupon Ya‘qūb, acting in a manner consistent with his previous recorded behavior toward penitent erstwhile religious deviants, honoured the man and appointed him a sub-governor in an outlying area. According to this version, the Khārijites killed ‘Abd al-Rahmān one year later, and their new leader, Ibrāhim, followed precisely the same policy that his predecessor had: namely, hastening to appear before Ya‘qūb and tender his obedience. Ya‘qūb thereupon told Ibrāhim and his people not to be afraid, for the bulk of his own army was in origin Khārijites (who had submitted and turned to better paths). In Islamic border warrior culture one typically finds the erstwhile enemy being co-opted into Islamic forces, from the very earliest times; for a discussion of the phenomenon in early Ottoman times see Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State*, Berkeley, 1995, especially pp. 19–27; and the section in Chapter 2, “Gaza and Gazis in the Frontier Narratives of Medieval Anatolia.”

This was, empirically, an extremely effective policy; as Bosworth notes, (“The Armies of the Ṣaffārids,” p. 544) after Ya‘qūb, “the role of the Khawārij in eastern Iran was now finished ... mention of the Khawārij henceforth drops out completely from the narrative of the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, whereas for the previous period it is extensively concerned with their activities; this cannot be fortuitous.”

In the meantime, Ya‘qūb’s – and others’ – “patience” with the moribund Tāhirid dynasty was fast waning. At the news of Ya‘qūb’s approach, a man who had apparently arrogated to himself authority in Herāt,⁷¹ named ‘Abdallāh b. Muḥammad, had fled from Herāt and gone to besiege Nishāpūr. Muḥammad b. Tāhir first tried to negotiate with the man, then in his weakness appointed ‘Abdallāh ruler over Ṭabasayn⁷² and Quhistān, in western Khurāsān.⁷³ At the same time, the ‘Alid al-Hasan b. Zayd conquered and overran the district of Qūmis.⁷⁴ In other words, except for a very small section of northeastern Khurāsān around Nishāpūr, the entire Tāhirid province had not only slipped out of the governor’s hands, but been virtually dismembered by various rebels and heretics.

It was at this point, in 259/872f., after these latest glaring proofs of just how precarious the Tāhirid realms had become, that Ya‘qūb received appeals from prominent religious figures and erstwhile Tāhirid officials and supporters to come and put an end to the effete Tāhirid dynasty and save Khurāsān from chaos. Indeed, we are told that many from among the hereditary governor’s closest associates and household supported Ya‘qūb: “Some of Muḥammad b. Tāhir’s *khāṣṣa* and some of his family, when they saw his rule declining, inclined towards Ya‘qūb, corresponded with him, and invited him [to come and take over].”⁷⁵ So deep an impression did this make that even accounts written much later, ones riddled with factual errors and apocryphal stories, still related that Ya‘qūb had taken Nishāpūr without a fight.⁷⁶

Even an overtly hostile account such as the *Tārikh-i guzīda* does not attempt to deny that Ya‘qūb took over Khurāsān with the support of the region’s notables; it simply tries to reinterpret that fact in order to preserve its own negative message:

It is probable that the *Tārikh-i Sīstān* has here confused somewhat the careers of Ibrāhīm and ‘Abd al-Rāḥmān; the latter was killed by Ya‘qūb and his head sent to Baghādād, while the former prudently submitted to the Ṣaffārid and probably renounced his former ways.

⁷¹ *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 217.

⁷² Or Ṭabas (actually the twin cities of Ṭabas), located in Quhistān, between Nishāpūr and Isfahān. Yāqūt says it is known as “the gate of Khurāsān” because it was the first city of Khurāsān to be conquered by the Arabs, in the time of the Caliph ‘Uthmān. (Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-buldān*, vol. 4, p. 20).

⁷³ Ṭabarī (*Tārikh*, vol. 9, p. 503) implies that the man had been affiliated with Ya‘qūb but had openly turned against him: “In [this year] ‘Abdallāh al-Sijzī parted from Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth in disobedience to him and besieged Nishāpūr. Muḥammad b. Tāhir sent messengers and *fugahā* to him, who went back and forth between the two sides. Then [Muḥammad] appointed him governor of al-Ṭabasayn and Quhistān.”

⁷⁴ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 266.

⁷⁵ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 263; see also Mīrkhwānd, *Rawdat al-ṣafā*, vol. 4, p. 9. Some of these Ṣaffārid supporters from Muḥammad b. Tāhir’s entourage state: “Know that carelessness has overtaken Muḥammad b. Tāhir, and his dynasty has come to its end.”

⁷⁶ E. g. Minhāj al-Dīn ‘Uthmān b. Sirāj al-Dīn Jūzjānī, *Tabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*, Kābul, 1342, vol. 1, p. 199: “After that he brought an army to Nishāpūr and took [it] without a fight in ... the year 259/872f.”

Ya‘qūb in kindness and friendship sent messengers to the *amīrs* of Khurāsān, and by means of their fear and hope he effected their submission to himself. Muḥammad b. Tāhir fell into drink, his rule was shattered, and he went to Baghdād.⁷⁷

While this account retains the fact of Muḥammad b. Tāhir’s drunkenness, it seems to imply that he only began to engage in such behaviour in order to drown his sorrows after Ya‘qūb had wooed all his supporters away from him. The *amīrs*’ support itself – as well as Ya‘qūb’s having used kindness rather than threats to gain that support – is also preserved, but the words “by means of their fear and hope” seem to imply that mere personal greed and pusillanimity motivated the defection of erstwhile Tāhirid supporters.

Yet at least some of Ya‘qūb’s supporters were not only Muḥammad b. Tāhir’s close political associates, but also religiously impeccable Sunnis. Before continuing with our narrative of Ya‘qūb’s first forays onto the larger Islamic political scene, therefore, it is worth pausing to examine, insofar as possible, Ya‘qūb’s and his brother ‘Amr’s known connections with Sunni religious scholars, for this will tell us much about ‘ayyār religious affiliations.

The ‘Ulamā’ of the Ṣaffārid ‘Ayyārs

One of the best proofs that, as ‘ayyārs, the Ṣaffārids were an offshoot of the proto-Sunni *mutaṭawwi‘* tradition lies in the prosopography of the religious scholars who supported them. Some of the strongest Ṣaffārid supporters in Khurāsān were Sunni Traditionist scholars, the direct heirs of the militant *ghāzī* tradition passed down from ‘Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak to the circle of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s associates and Ya‘qūb’s Sīstānī compatriot Abū Dā’ūd al-Sijistānī. One such Ṣaffārid supporter was the *amīr* Abū Haytham Khālid b. Aḥmad b. Khālid al-Dhuhlī, for instance, a *muḥaddith* of Bukhārā who had served repeatedly as the Tāhirid representative in Marv and Herāt, then subsequently became the administrative officer over all Khurāsān [*wālī Khurāsān*].⁷⁸ This man is said to have become alarmed by Tāhirid incompetence and, as a result, to have turned towards Ya‘qūb. In fact, Khālid, when subsequently passing through Baghdaḍ on his way to the Hajj, was imprisoned by the Caliph on account of the former’s strong support for the Ṣaffārids.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Qazvīnī, *Tārikh-i guzīda*, pp. 361-362.

⁷⁸ al-Sam‘ānī, *Kitāb al-Ansāb*, vol. 3, p. 18. Ibn al-Athīr calls him “*Amīr Khurāsān*,” (*al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 412), as does al-Dhahabī (*Ta’rīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 83), who describes him as “*Amīr Khurāsān* in Transoxiana.”

⁷⁹ Al-Sam‘ānī, *loc. cit.* . p. 19; Ibn al-Athīr, *loc. cit.* Al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 83, also notes that “In the latter days of his rule he came out against *Āl Tābir* and inclined towards Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth b. al-Ṣaffār,” whom Dhahabī describes as having “revolted in Sijistān.”

Khālid receives very honourable write-ups in the biographical literature; thus, for instance, al-Baghdādī writes of him:

Khālid b. Aḥmad b. Khālid b. Ḥammād ... Abū'l Haytham al-Dhuhlī al-Amīr, governor [*wāli imārāt*] of Marv and Herāt, and other towns in Khurāsān besides, subsequently governor of Bukhārā ... When he settled in Bukhārā, the guardians of *ḥadīth* came to his presence ... Khālid used to go with the aforementioned [traditionists] to the gates of the *muḥaddithīn* in order to hear [traditions] from them; he would go on foot, in a loose outer garment and sandals, abasing himself by this. His hand was outspread in charity to *abl al-‘ilm* ... [Khālid's quarrel with Muḥammad b. Ismā‘il al-Bukhārī is related, ending with Khālid's expulsion of the latter from the city] Some of *abl al-‘ilm* said: "What he did to Muḥammad b. Ismā‘il al-Bukhārī was the reason for the end of his rule."⁸⁰

There are several traditions which seem to indicate Khālid's genuine love of and devotion to pious Traditionist learning, for instance: "... I heard Abū'l-Haytham Khālid b. Aḥmad al-Amīr say: I have spent over a million dirhams in the pursuit of 'ilm ..."⁸¹ and that Abū'l Haytham "brought to [Bukhārā] the *muḥaddithīn* and honoured them."⁸²

Khālid b. Aḥmad's devotion to Traditionism was such that after retiring from public life he travelled to Baghdād to relate *ḥadīth* in that city to a long list of students. It was this sojourn, according to one source, that led to his arrest;⁸³ the caliph had not forgotten Khālid's deep support of Ya‘qūb; therefore "the authorities seized Khālid and threw him in jail in Baghdād; and he was never freed until he died."⁸⁴ Toward the close of this entry we find information about Khālid's Ṣaffārid proclivities:

Khālid b. Aḥmad was vehemently opposed to the Tāhirids toward the end of their rule, and inclined toward Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth, who had arisen in Sijistān [*al-qā’im bi-Sijistān*]; so much so that when Muḥammad b. Tāhir was carried to Sijistān, Khālid was in Herāt

⁸⁰ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, vol. 8, pp. 314-315. Khālid's disagreement with al-Bukhārī was at the behest of the proto-Hanbalite circle; according to Dhahabī, *Siyar a’lām al-nubalā’*, vol. 12, p. 463, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's close associate Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-Dhuhlī (another Ṣaffārid supporter – *vide infra*) wrote to Khālid b. Yaḥyā to warn him against al-Bukhārī: "This man has already shown deviation from the *Sunna*." The reason for the campaign against al-Bukhārī was his espousal of "lafzīyya" doctrines, which Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal had already declared so heretical that those who espoused these beliefs should be considered infidels (see Christopher Melchert, "The Adversaries of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal," *Arabica* 44: 2 [1997], pp. 237, 241). For more on the expulsion of al-Bukhārī from Nīshāpūr, see *infra*. For a general discussion of the outlook of Ibn Ḥanbal and his associates at this time see Muhammed Qasim Zaman, *Religion and Politics Under the Early ‘Abbāsids. Islamic History and Civilization: Studies and Texts*, vol. 16, Leiden, 1997, pp. 62-69.

⁸¹ Al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, vol. 8, p. 316; al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 84.

⁸² Al-Dhahabī, *ibid.*, p. 83.

⁸³ Although we saw above that different sources attributed Khālid's presence in Baghdād to the Ḥajj. Note, however, that all the sources attribute Khālid's presence in Baghdād to pious pursuits.

⁸⁴ Al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, vol. 8, p. 316. Al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 83, notes that he was imprisoned, but neglects to mention that this was a caliphal action taken in retaliation for Abū'l-Haytham's support of the Ṣaffārids.

and told [Muhammad] to his face about all he had done wrong. Then Khālid passed through Baghdād on the Ḥajj in the year 269/882f. and was jailed in Baghdād. He died in the prison in Baghdād in the year 269 ...⁸⁵

We find an entry almost identical in wording in al-Sam‘ānī’s biographical dictionary; though al-Sam‘ānī stresses even more his positive evaluation of the man: “There are many famous stories about him, all praiseworthy, except for his having a grudge against *imām abl al-ḥadīth* Muḥammad b. Ismā‘il al-Bukhārī; this was an error, and the reason for the end of his rule.”⁸⁶ Al-Sam‘ānī hastens to reassure us, however, that Khālid “took upon himself after this the maintenance of [several prominent traditionists].” Moreover Sam‘ānī repeats the story we have just seen above regarding Khālid’s passion for *muḥaddithīn*, adding a few extra details as well:

The *amīr* Abū'l-Haytham used to go frequently with [several prominent religious scholars] to the gates of the *muḥaddithīn* in [only an] outer wrap and shoes and behaved well towards them, modestly and humbly, to the point where it is said that he wrote traditions from 600 individuals of the *muḥaddithīn* of Bukhārā.⁸⁷

Sam‘ānī details as well Khālid’s passionate support of the Ṣaffārids, and his vehement upbraiding of Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir for his failure in executing his duties, ending with Khālid’s imprisonment at the hands of the caliph and death while incarcerated.

The support of the Dhuhlis of Khurāsān for the Ṣaffārids continued firm and unwavering in both Ya‘qūb’s and ‘Amr’s time, led in the latter period by the even more illustrious father-son duo of Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā and Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad (known as “Haykān”). Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-Nay-sābūrī al-Dhuhli was, in fact, a crucial link in the chain of *mutaṭawwi‘ī* tradition stretching from ‘Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak, through Sa‘īd b. Manṣūr, from whom he heard traditions⁸⁸ (and who is also described as having transmitted traditions from him),⁸⁹ to the Ḥanbalite circle; Sa‘īd b. Manṣūr, it will be recalled, was one of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s teachers as well.⁹⁰ Sa‘īd b. Manṣūr is also particularly prominent in traditions of *ghazzwī*;⁹¹ and transmitted from many of the first-generation *mutaṭawwi‘ī*;⁹² all of this, of course, further reinforces Ṣaffārid *ghazzī* credentials and places major Ṣaffārid supporters firmly in the most militant wing of the *abl al-ḥadīth* and the pro-*mutaṭawwi‘ī* camp.

⁸⁵ Al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, vol. 8, p. 316.

⁸⁶ Al-Sam‘ānī, *Kitāb al-ansāb*, vol. 3, p. 18. Al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 83, speaks about his praiseworthy legacy as well.

⁸⁷ Al-Sam‘ānī, *Kitāb al-ansāb*, vol. 3, p. 18.

⁸⁸ See al-Mizzī, *Tabdīb al-kamāl*, vol. 3, p. 201.

⁸⁹ al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, vol. 3, p. 415; al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, vol. 12, p. 275.

⁹⁰ Ibn ‘Asākir, *Ta’rīkh madīnat Dimashq*, vol. 21, p. 303.

⁹¹ See e. g. Abū Dā’ūd, *Kitāb al-Sunan*, vol. 3, “*Kitāb al-jihād*,” (pp. 200-355) *passim*.

⁹² See the long list in Dhahabī, *Siyar*, vol. 10, pp. 586-587.

Muhammad b. Yahyā, as we shall see, had excellent personal relations with Ahmad b. Ḥanbal himself,⁹³ and related traditions on the latter's authority,⁹⁴ including regarding who was or was not a reliable transmitter of traditions.⁹⁵ There is some confusion regarding Muhammad b. Yahyā al-Dhuhlī in the sources; he is listed under two slightly different names in the biographical literature, and, since it seems most unlikely that there would be at this time two traditionists called Muhammad al-Dhuhlī in eastern Khurāsān, obviously from the same family if not one and the same person, both connected to Ahmad b. Ḥanbal, students of the same *muḥaddithīn*, and both father to an important son named Yahyā, one must conclude that the two aforementioned men are one and the same person.⁹⁶ To further complicate matters, there is also some confusion between Muhammad b. Yahyā and his son Yahyā b. Muhammad in some of the sources, a point we shall address presently.

At any rate, both of the men at this time named in the sources as Muhammad al-Dhuhlī and operating in Khurāsān can be connected directly to the militant proto-Sunni tradition we have been tracing. The man given as Abū Yahyā Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Dhuhlī, was, like our Muhammad b. Yahyā, a pupil of the very important *muḥaddith*, Sa‘īd b. Manṣūr b. Shu‘ba Abū ‘Uthmān al-Khurāsānī. Furthermore, the man who was the father of Yahyā b. Muhammad (known as “Haykān”, whom we shall be discussing shortly), Abū ‘Abdallāh Muhammad b. Yahyā al-Naysābūrī al-Dhuhlī, is asserted to have transmitted directly from Ahmad b. Ḥanbal,⁹⁷ from other direct pupils of his,⁹⁸ and from the famous ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣāḥīḥī.⁹⁹

⁹³ They may very well have been friends from their student days, when they both heard traditions from at least three of the students of Ibn al-Mubārak, with whom they had in turn studied: Sa‘īd b. al-Manṣūr – with whom Muhammad's son Yahyā studied as well (al-Mizzī, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 201), ‘Affān b. Muslim, and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Mahdi. Ibn ‘Asākir (*Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, vol. 5, p. 326) relates, under the biography of Ahmad b. Ḥanbal, the following of Muhammad b. Yahyā: “I heard Muhammad b. Yahyā al-Naysābūrī – when [the news of] the death of Ahmad b. Ḥanbal reached him – saying: It behooves all the householders in Baghdād to observe mourning for Ahmad b. Ḥanbal in their houses.”

⁹⁴ Ibn Abī Ya‘lā, *Tabaqāt al-ḥanābila*, vol. 1, pp. 446, 448.

⁹⁵ Ibn Abī Ya‘lā, *Tabaqāt al-ḥanābila*, vol. 1, p. 448.

⁹⁶ In fact, there may have been yet a third Muhammad al-Dhuhlī, unless our same prior “*wāli Khurāsān*” is being referred to in the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*'s reports that in 213/828 Muhammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Dhuhlī was appointed viceroy in Sīstān, where he encountered trouble with the Khārijites (*Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 179).

⁹⁷ Ibn Abī Ya‘lā, *Tabaqāt al-ḥanābila*, vol. 1, p. 446.

⁹⁸ Thus in the biography of Ahmad b. Ṣāliḥ, we are told that he studied in Baghdād with Ibn Ḥanbal, “then returned to Egypt and dwelt there, and spread his knowledge among its people. [The following] transmitted from him: Muhammad b. Yahyā al-Dhuhlī, al-Bukhārī, Ya‘qūb al-Fasawī, and others.” Ibn Abī Ya‘lā, *Tabaqāt al-ḥanābila*, vol. 1, p. 83.

⁹⁹ For the information on ‘Abd al-Razzāq, see Sam‘ānī, *al-Ansāb*, vol. 3, p. 493; al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, vol. 12, pp. 276-277.

Muhammad b. Yahyā appears to have travelled quite widely in his search for traditions; he is said to have heard traditions in ‘Irāq, the Ḥijāz, Syria, Egypt, and the Jazīra.¹⁰⁰ He has a very high reputation in the Ḥanbalite literature; according to one tradition:

There remain to us today in the world three [great scholars of *ḥadīth*]: Muhammad b. Yahyā al-Duhulī in Khurāsān; Abū Mas‘ūd in Isfahān; and al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī al-Hulwānī in Mecca. The one among them who knows the most *ḥadīth*: Muhammad b. Yahyā ...¹⁰¹

Further confirmation of his prestige in Ḥanbalite circles can be found in the following tradition:

Muhammad b. Yahyā b. ‘Abdallāh b. Khālid b. Fāris b. Dhu‘ayb, Abū ‘Abdallāh al-Nisābūrī al-Duhulī ... one of the *imāms* of the ‘Irāqīs,¹⁰² [among] the keepers of those of firm belief, and [one of] the trustworthy ones of the believers, who compiled the traditions of al-Zuhri by himself ... Ahmad b. Ḥanbal used to praise him and broadcast his excellence, and a number of the greatest transmitted from him, such as ... Sa‘īd b. Mansūr ... and Abū Dā‘ūd al-Sijistānī¹⁰³

Muhammad’s Sistānī connections also included the prominent Sistānī ‘ālim Abū Ḥātim, who is supposed to have written down traditions from him.¹⁰⁴

An anecdote is told of the honour and regard in which Ahmad b. Ḥanbal held him; according to this story, a group of Ibn Ḥanbal’s associates were present at the latter’s residence when Muhammad b. Yahyā entered, upon which Ahmad b. Ḥanbal rose. Everyone present wondered to see their Imām paying such respect to someone; then Ibn Ḥanbal turned to his sons and companions and said: “Go to Abū ‘Abdallāh [viz., Muhammad b. Yahyā] and write down [*ḥadīths*] from him.”¹⁰⁵

Ibn Ḥanbal is also reported to have said that he never met a Khurāsānī who knew more of al-Zuhri’s *ḥadīths*.¹⁰⁶ In fact, the son of Sa‘īd b. Mansūr is supposed to have related that when Sa‘īd b. Mansūr asked one scholar why he was

¹⁰⁰ al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, vol. 3, p. 415.

¹⁰¹ Ibn Abī Ya‘lā, *Tabaqāt al-fuqahā’ al-ḥanābila*, vol. 1, p. 91. The same statement is made with a different attribution in Muhammad b. Shākir al-Kutubī, *Uyūn al-tawārīkh*, Beirut 1416/1996, p. 330.

¹⁰² Alternatively, he is called “*Shaykh al-Islām ... wa-imām abl al-ḥadīth bi-Khurāsān*.” (Dhahabī, *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, vol. 12, p. 273)

¹⁰³ al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, vol. 3, pp. 415-416.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, vol. 12, p. 275.

¹⁰⁵ al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, p. 416; Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, vol. 12, p. 280. The regard was mutual; Muhammad b. Yahyā is reported by his son to have said: “I hold Ahmad b. Ḥanbal my imām in matters between me and my Lord, may he be glorified and exalted.” (p. 282)

¹⁰⁶ al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, p. 417; al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, vol. 12, p. 281. An even stronger statement is the following: “I used to hear our religious leaders [*mashā’ikhanā*] saying: The tradition that Muhammad b. Yahyā does not know is not worth knowing [lit. : is insignificant].” *Ibid.* p. 280.

not collecting al-Zuhri's traditions, the scholar replied, "Muhammad b. Yahyā spared us this [i. e., by already doing the work himself]."¹⁰⁷

Muhammad b. Yahyā is also called "the Imām of the people of his time."¹⁰⁸ In the same vein, another tradition states:

Janjawayh b. Muhammad: I heard Abū 'Amr al-Mustamli say: I reached Ahmad b. Hanbal. He said "Whence do you come?" I replied: "From Nishāpūr." He said, "Does Abū 'Abdallāh Muhammad b. Yahyā have a *majlis*?" I answered: "Yes." He said: "If only he were with us [here], we would deem him the Imām of *hadīth* [ja' alnāhu al-imāma fi'l-hadīth ...]"¹⁰⁹

Moreover, Muhammad b. Yahyā seems to have acted as theological watchdog for the Hanbalites. It was he who warned Ahmad b. Hanbal against associating with the theologian Dā'ūd al-Zāhirī, due to the latter's espousal of *lafzīyya* beliefs.¹¹⁰ Subsequently, he was personally responsible for the expulsion of al-Bukhārī from Nishāpūr on the same grounds.¹¹¹ Under the biographical entry on the Imām Muslim b. al-Hajjāj, we find the following anecdote regarding Muslim's inclusion with al-Bukhārī as the target of Muhammad b. Yahyā's anti-*lafzī* crusade:

Muslim b. al-Hajjāj used to expound the teaching about *al-lafz* and did not keep silent about it. When al-Bukhārī settled in Nishāpūr Muslim visited him frequently, so that when there occurred what occurred between al-Bukhārī and Muhammad b. Yahyā regarding the question of *lafz*, he summoned him, and prevented the people from frequenting him until he left and travelled from Nishāpūr. ... Most of the people broke off with [al-Bukhārī] apart from Muslim. This reached Muhammad b. Yahyā one day, and he said: "Verily, it is not permitted to someone who expounds *al-lafz* to be present in our *majlis*."¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, vol. 12, p. 280.

¹⁰⁸ al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, p. 418. The son of Abū Hātim, one of the greatest of the Sīstānī 'ulamā', reports: "My father wrote [traditions] from Muhammad b. Yahyā in Rayy, and he [that is, Muhammad b. Yahyā] was a truthful authority [*thiqā ṣadūq*], a leader among the leaders of the Muslims [*imām min a'immat al-muslimīn*], whom my father trusted, and I heard [my father] say: He is the leader of the people of his day [*huwa imāmu abli zamānīhi*]." Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, vol. 12, p. 281. In the same place, the son of Abū Dā'ūd al-Sīstānī calls him "*amīr al-mu'minīn fi'l-hadīth*."

¹⁰⁹ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, vol. 12, p. 280. A similar tradition states: "The Imām of imāms Ibn Khuzayma said: Muhammad b. Yahyā al-Dhuhlī, the imām of his age, may God cause him to dwell in His garden with those who love him, related to us." (*ibid.* p. 284).

¹¹⁰ On this whole issue, see Melchert, "The Adversaries of Ahmad b. Hanbal," pp. 244-245; al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 93 also speaks about Muhammad b. Yahyā's having warned against these doctrines of Dā'ūd's. al-Dhahabī also indicates Muhammad's superiority to Dā'ūd al-Zāhirī, stating (p. 92) that "*Muhammad b. Yahyā aṣdaqu minhu*." For an inadvertently humorous attempt to reconcile the Hanbalite and *lafzī* positions on the whole issue of Allāh's speech see Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī's *Fatḥ al-bārī bi-sharḥ saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* on the subject.

¹¹¹ Ṣafadī, *Kitāb al-wāfi bi'l-Wafayāt*, vol. 5, p. 187; Melchert, "Adversaries," pp. 245-246. For this quarrel, and Ahmad b. Hanbal's alliance with Muhammad b. Yahyā on this matter, see al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, vol. 12, pp. 284-285.

¹¹² Al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 188.

This kind of uncompromising attitude toward the religiously erring accords well with what we know of other ‘ulama’ in the *mutaṭawwi'a* tradition, particularly ‘Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak, who is said, for instance, to have refused to speak for thirty days with one of his close associates simply because that man had eaten with an “innovator”[*sāhib bid'a*].¹¹³

Muhammad b. Yahyā's general reputation as a traditionist was also of the highest order. One major biographical work informs us of an anecdote related by the great traditionist al-Nasā'i:

Abū ‘Amr Ahmad b. Naṣr al-Khaffāf said: “I saw Muhammad b. Yahyā in my sleep, and I asked him: ‘How has God acted toward you [or: what has God done with you]?’ He answered: ‘He has forgiven me.’ I said: ‘And what was done with your *hadīths*?’ He answered: ‘They were written in water of gold and were raised to the highest place in heaven.’¹¹⁴

No birthdate is given for him, but he is said to have died somewhere between 252/866 and 258/872.¹¹⁵ Interestingly enough for our purposes, there are some indications that Muhammad b. Yahyā's teachings possessed a rather militant *ghāzī/mutaṭawwi'* tendency of their own: both of his known sons – who both studied with him – and at least one of his pupils are described as *ghāzīs* in the biographical literature, while yet another died a martyr's death.¹¹⁶

Muhammad's son Yahyā b. Muhammad b. Yahyā b. ‘Abdallāh b. Khālid b. Fāris al-Dhuhli, Abū Zakariyyā al-Naysābūri, was an ‘ālim equally as prominent as his father.¹¹⁷ He is described as “the *shaykh* of Nishāpūr after his father, its mufti, and the head of the *mutaṭawwi'a*. [He was] of the *qurrā'*;”¹¹⁸ or, in a different account: “*Amīr al-mutaṭawwi'a al-mujāhidīn*.¹¹⁹

¹¹³ Al-İsbahānī, *Hilyat al-aawliyā'*, vol. 8, p. 178, #11799.

¹¹⁴ Ṣafadī, *loc. cit.*; Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, vol. 12, p. 278.

¹¹⁵ al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rikh Baghdaḍ*, p. 420; Ibn al-Athīr (*al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 258) lists his death under 258/c. 872; Ṣafadī, *ibid.*, concurs with Ibn al-Athīr, as does al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, vol. 12, p. 284.

¹¹⁶ For Abū'l Ḥusayn Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Yahyā al-Naysābūri al-Ghāzī see al-Samā'ānī, *al-Ansāb*, vol. 4, p. 244, #7476; for al-Dhuhli's pupil Abū Ḥāmid Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Rafā' al-Ghāzī al-Naysābūri, see *ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 245, #7477; his pupil Abū'l-'Abbās Ḥāmid b. Maḥmūd b. Muḥammad al-Sikishi al-Naysābūri al-Shahīd can be found in *ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 292, #5269.

¹¹⁷ He is sometimes incorrectly called “Ḥaykān,” a term which seems more properly to belong to his relation, Khālid b. Aḥmad b. Khālid al-Dhuhli, also active in supporting the Saffārids. *Pace* Bosworth, who follows Ibn al-Athīr's mistake (*al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 300) in identifying Khālid b. Aḥmad b. Khālid al-Dhuhli (the grandson of the *amīr* *Bukhārā* discussed above) with Yahyā b. Muhammad b. Yahyā al-Dhuhli; Gardizi (*Zayn al-akhbār*, p. 9) makes very clear that these were two different, but related, people: “And Ḥaykān Qārī [viz. Khālid b. Aḥmad b. Khālid] and Yahyā b. Muḥammad b. [the editor mistakenly has “wa” instead of “b.” here] Yahyā al-Dhuhli – they [were] *mutaṭawwi'a* and *fuqahā'* of Nishāpūr – inclined towards ‘Amr ...”

¹¹⁸ Al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 198.

¹¹⁹ Abū Muḥammad ‘Abdullāh b. As'ad al-Yāfi'i, *Mir'at al-jinān wa-'ibrat al-yaqzān fī ma'rifat mā yu'tabaru min ḥawādith al-zamān*, Hyderabad, 1337/1918, vol. 2, p. 181.

Yahyā transmitted *ḥadīth* directly from Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and his father's associate Saʿīd b. Maṇṣūr, and was considered to be a *sadūq* transmitter.¹²⁰ In fact, he is said to have surpassed his father in religious knowledge and understanding, as illustrated by the following anecdote:

Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. Yahyā al-Muzakkī said: Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad and others told me that Muḥammad b. Yahyā and his son Yahyā [once] disagreed about an issue, so that one of them said to the other: “place a judge between us in this.” So they agreed upon Muḥammad b. Iṣhāq b. Khuzayma, and he judged in favour of Yahyā b. Muḥammad over his father.¹²¹

More importantly, Yahyā b. Muḥammad apparently kept alive the pious and militant *mutaqawwī* tradition in person:

Yahyā b. Muḥammad used to go out himself with the *ghuzāt*, together with a group from among [both] *ashāb al-ḥadīth* and *ashāb al-ra'y*, and they placed him upon a mount and armed him with a sword – al-Muzakkī said: I heard that it was a wooden sword – and they fought the ruler of Nīshāpūr, called Aḥmad b. ‘Abdallāh al-Ḥujistānī [sic], a Khārijite who had taken over the city. [al-Khujistānī] was a tyrannical oppressor, and the people, or most of them, agreed with Yahyā b. Muḥammad regarding him. But defeat came upon the people, and Yahyā b. Muḥammad fled to a village from among the villages of Nīshāpūr, called Busht, but Aḥmad b. ‘Abdallāh followed him and came upon him. It is said: most of those leaders who were with Yahyā turned against him when Aḥmad b. ‘Abdallāh arrested him, and he said to him: “Have I not been good to you?” ... Yahyā b. Muḥammad was over all the people of the city [i. e. their leader], but Yahyā b. Muḥammad said: “I disapproved of this, but they united against me [i. e. and forced me to lead them in the revolt]” ... but they [in turn] said: “It is not as he said.” So Aḥmad b. ‘Abdallāh took him and killed him. It is said that he built upon him [i. e. immured him – *banā ‘alayhī*], and it is [also] said that he commanded that his private parts be pulled until he died, and this was in the year two hundred and sixty-something.¹²²

Muḥammad b. Ṣāliḥ b. Hāni' said: Abū Zakariyyā Yahyā b. Muḥammad b. al-Shahīd; Aḥmad b. ‘Abdallāh al-Khujistānī killed him wrongfully in Jumādā II of the year 267/880f.¹²³

¹²⁰ Al-Mizzī, *Tabdhib al-kamāl fī asmā' al-rijāl*, vol. 8, pp. 85-86; al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, vol. 12, p. 286; *idem.*, *Ta'rikh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 198. For an *isnād* showing the direct line of transmission, see Ibn Abī Ya'la, *Tabaqāt al-ḥanābila*, vol. 1, p. 535.

¹²¹ Al-Mizzī, *Tabdhib*, vol. 8, p. 86.

¹²² Yet another, equally gruesome account of his murder can be found in Dhahabī, *Siyar*, vol. 12, p. 287, and *idem.*, *Ta'rikh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 199, which is obviously intended to demonstrate al-Khujistānī's violence and personal responsibility for the crime; according to this version, al-Khujistānī tries virtually every method of execution possible without success – beating, choking, etcetera – until he finally does away with Yahyā by stabbing him in the abdomen.

¹²³ Cf. al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, vol. 12, p. 287: “Aḥmad b. ‘Abdallāh al-Khujistānī killed him wrongfully in Jumādā II of the year 267, because of his [Haykān's] having risen against him, and he [Haykān] fought him [al-Khujistānī] because of his aggression and his tyranny.”

Al-Ḥākim Abū ‘Abdallāh al-Ḥāfiẓ said: I heard Abū ‘Abdallāh b. al-Akhram say: I never saw the likes of Haykān, may God have no mercy on his killer.¹²⁴

According to a different source, this same al-Ḥākim al-Ḥāfiẓ also stated the following regarding Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad:

He is the Imām of Nīshāpūr in fatwas and leadership [*alfatāwā wa'l-rī'asa*], the son of [Nīshāpūr]'s *imām*, and the unopposed leader of the *mutatawwi'a* in Khurāsān [*Amīr al-muṭawwi'a bi-Khurāsān bi-lā mudāfa'a*], that is: the *ghāzīs* [*al-ghuzāt*].¹²⁵

The fact that this prominent *mutatawwi'* family was so deeply and steadily involved in supporting the Ṣaffārids in Nīshāpūr, from the time of Ya'qūb's ousting of the Ṭāhirids to the dark days when al-Khujistānī had wrested all of Khurāsān from 'Amr and it must have seemed as though the Ṣaffārids were finished, certainly provides evidence of impeccably orthodox – and deeply religious – support for the Ṣaffārids. It also raises the highly intriguing – and germane – question of whether and to what degree nascent Sunni Islam was, at this point, quietist in the same way as later Sunnism. This is a question to which we shall be returning shortly.¹²⁶

The Ṣaffārids also had the support of less prominent, although equally orthodox, *'ulamā'* as well. We have already mentioned above Ya'qūb's connections with 'Uthmān b. 'Affān;¹²⁷ he was, it will be recalled, one of the religious figures sent as a mediator by Ibrāhīm al-Qūsī, the governor, to the *'ayyārān* headed by Ṣāliḥ b. Naṣr in 239/854.¹²⁸ 'Uthmān was also the man whom Ṣāliḥ consulted when things were going poorly for him,¹²⁹ and the one whom Ya'qūb entrusted with making the *khuṭba* in Sīstān while he himself was absent on campaign in the Herāt area.¹³⁰

The *Tārīkh-i Sīstān* is proud of him as one of the province's outstanding great men, listed alongside such illustrious *'ulamā'* as Abū Dā'ūd, Abū Ḥātim, *et alii*; "These [men] in knowledge and greatness occupied such a place that no one in the world could deny their merit."¹³¹ He is also eulogized as "a great man in reli-

¹²⁴ Al-Mizzī, *Tahdhib*, p. 86; al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, vol. 14, p. 218; the last part of this tradition appears also in al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 199; the tradition appears in its entirety in Dhahabī's *Siyār*, vol. 12, pp. 293-294. Al-Baghdādī adds "al-qurrā'" to the list of those who chose Yaḥyā to lead them against al-Khujistānī.

¹²⁵ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyār*, vol. 12, p. 285; *idem.*, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 198 has almost identical wording.

¹²⁶ *Vide infra*, chapter 5.

¹²⁷ Calling one's children after the Rāshidūn caliphs seems to have been something of a trend at this time among the Traditionists of Sijistān; al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, pp. 140-141, notes the death of one of Abū Dā'ūd's teachers, 'Umar b. al-Khaṭāb al-Sijistānī.

¹²⁸ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 195.

¹²⁹ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, pp. 196-197.

¹³⁰ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, p. 209.

¹³¹ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, pp. 19-21.

gious knowledge and *fiqh*.¹³² His father was most probably that same ‘Affān – listed without any patronymic – among the students of ‘Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak, which, if true, would make the son’s ties to the *mutaṭawwi‘* tradition even stronger and clearer.¹³³

‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān was an eminent figure well before the rise of the ‘ayyārs in Sīstān; during the early part of the reign of the caliph al-Mu‘taṣim [c. 833], ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān was, along with a group of the other prominent Sunni ‘ulamā’, entrusted with a mission to exhort a former Khārijite freelancer (who had repented and now spent his time zealously eradicating his former friends) to lay down his arms.¹³⁴ During the famine of 221 (835-836), the governor of Sīstān, on the instructions of ‘Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir, entrusted 300,000 dirhams in state money to ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān and Ḥusayn b. ‘Amr, “the religious leaders [*fuqahā’*] of the two sects [i. e. *abl al-sunna* and *abl al-ra‘y*]” for distribution to the needy.¹³⁵ Obviously, his reputation was very high in Sīstān, and we are told this explicitly; Dhahabī, for instance, says: “He commanded honour in his province because of his merit and his asceticism [*zuhd*].”¹³⁶

‘Uthmān’s local eminence and reputation, alas, did not extend to his legacy as a *ḥadīth* transmitter; his standing as a *muḥaddith* was forever destroyed by the Shāfi‘ī *muḥaddith* Ibn Khuzayma, whose statement “I bear witness that he used to forge ḥadīths about the Prophet” relegated ‘Uthmān to the collections of weak traditions.¹³⁷ In this, too, he accords well with the type of a “*ṣāḥib sunna*” as noted first by Juynboll,¹³⁸ then, more particularly in the specific *ghāzī*-supporting context, by Michael Bonner. Bonner – who pithily encapsulated Juynboll’s findings in the statement: “The *ashāb sunna* tended to receive poor to middling

¹³² *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 215.

¹³³ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’*, vol. 8, p. 380.

¹³⁴ *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, pp. 184-185. ‘Uthmān was also quite possibly the son of a Sīstānī ‘ālim killed fighting the Khārijites in 188/804, ‘Affān b. Muḥammad, eulogized as “of the great ones, and of the ‘ulamā’ and *fuqahā’* of his time.” (*Ibid.* p. 159).

¹³⁵ *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 186.

¹³⁶ Dhahabī, *Tārikh al-Islām*, v. 19, p. 206. In fact, he was prominent enough to have been used in a very typical Shi‘ite attempt to depict prominent Sunnis witnessing to the truth of Shi‘ite views. See Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlīsī, *Bihār al-anwār*, Tehran, 1377/1957, vol. 39, pp. 320-321.

¹³⁷ Burhān al-Dīn al-Halabī, *al-Kashf al-ḥathīth ‘amman rumiya bi-waṣṭi al-ḥadīth*, Baghdađ, 1984, p. 286; Abū’l Faraj ‘Abd al-Rahmān Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-dū‘afā’ wa’l-matrūkin*, ed. Abū’l Fidā’ ‘Abdullāh al-Qādī, Beirut, 1407/1986, vol. 2, p. 171; Dhahabī, *al-Mughnī fī l-dū‘afā’*, ed. Nūr al-Dīn ‘Itir, Aleppo, 1971, vol. 2, p. 427; Shihāb al-Dīn Ahmad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Lisān al-mīzān*, ed. A. A. ‘Abd al-Mawjūd, Beirut, 1416/1995, vol. 4, p. 172. Ibn Ḥajar adds: al-Jawzaqānī [i. e. al-Juzjānī] said: [he was] *matrūk al-ḥadīth*; he used to steal traditions. And al-Barqānī said: “I asked al-Shamakhī about him and he said: ‘He was as God wanted him in his religion [*huwa ka-mā shā’llāh fi dīnihi*].”

¹³⁸ G. H. A. Juynboll, “Some New Ideas on the Development of Sunna as a Technical Term in Early Islām,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 10 (1987), pp. 97-118.

grades as traditionists, they were characterized as ascetics,¹³⁹ and the *ḥadīth* which they related was often hortatory ... without much legal content” – observed this type in connection with the famous second-century scholar-ascetics of the frontier, the formulators of the *mutaṭawwī* tradition we have been tracing here.¹⁴⁰

The name of another of the Ṣaffārid rulers’ most religiously impressive associates is disclosed in an anecdote regarding Ya‘qūb’s reverence for ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān; under the biographical entry for Ya‘qūb b. Sufyān al-Fasawī, said to be the greatest of the Traditionists in Fārs, in the *Mukhtaṣar Ta’rīkh Dimashq*, we are told the following:

Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. ‘Abdān said: When Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth, the lord of Khurāsān, came to Fārs, he was told that here was a man who spoke of [yatakkallimū fī] ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān – may God be pleased with him – and Ya‘qūb b. Sufyān al-Fasawī, who was accompanying Ya‘qūb, wanted to meet him. So [Ya‘qūb] ordered his dispatch from Fasā to Shirāz. But when he arrived the wazīr knew what was in the heart of the ruler, and said: “O commander, this man who has arrived, does not speak of Abū Muḥammad ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān, our Shaykh” – known as al-Sijzī – “but rather speaks of ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān, the companion of the Prophet.” When he heard this he said: “What have I to do with the companions of the Prophet? I thought that he was speaking about ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān al-Sijzī.” So he didn’t appear before him.¹⁴¹

This tradition is important for several reasons, other than demonstrating Ya‘qūb’s regard for his personal ‘ulamā’ and his shocking indifference (from an Islamic standpoint) toward the actual *ṣaḥāba*; for it teaches us both that Ya‘qūb would seek out and consult Traditionists, and that he travelled accompanied by such illustrious ‘ulamā’ as Ya‘qūb b. Sufyān al-Fasawī. This latter – whose full name, Ya‘qūb b. Sufyān b. Jawān Al-Fārisī, Abū Yusuf b. Abī Mu‘āwiya al-Fasawī al-Ḥāfiẓ, is assertively Sunni¹⁴² – is said to have been

... among the greatest leaders [kāna min al-‘imma al-kibār] of those who gathered [ḥadīth], and travelled from the east to the west, and collected the most with godliness, devotion, and firmness in the Sunna [al-ṣalāba fī l-sunna]. He travelled to Ḥiraq, the Ḥijāz, Syria, North Africa and Egypt, and wrote down [traditions] ... He died on the 23 of Rajab in the year 277/890.¹⁴³

Al-Fasawī’s biographical entry in the great dictionary of al-Mizzī is quite lengthy. He is there described as “the author of famous *ḥadīth* compendia;” the list of those whom he transmitted from covers one and a half folio-sized pages of minute writing and includes Sa‘īd b. Maṇṣūr – once again returning us to the

¹³⁹ Which we have just seen that ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān was.

¹⁴⁰ M. Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence*, p. 111.

¹⁴¹ Ibn Maṇṣūr, *Mukhtaṣar Ta’rīkh Dimashq*, vol. 28, pp. 44-46.

¹⁴² Indeed, he is actually described by Ibn al-Athīr as very partisan: “wa-kāna yataṣḥay-yā‘u” (Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 440).

¹⁴³ Al-Sam‘ānī, *al-Ansāb*, vol. 4, p. 362. Abū Ḥātim Muḥammad Ibn Ḥibbān, *Kitāb al-Thiqāt*, Hyderabad, 1403/1983, vol. 9, echoes this appraisal, but lists his death date as 280 or 281 (c. 893).

mutaṭawwī tradition. His pupils included the illustrious compilers al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī, who became part of the Sunni canon.¹⁴⁴ Ya‘qūb b. Sufyān is also described as “the leader of the Traditionists [*imām abl al-hadīth*] in Fārs.” He also had professional connections with Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-Dhuhlī, whom we have discussed above; one of al-Fasawī’s students relates that “Abū Yusuf Ya‘qūb b. Sufyān al-Fārisī taught us *ḥadīth* in Nīshāpūr in the *majlis* of Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā in the year 241/855f.”¹⁴⁵

Another of Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth’s associates about whom we have information is a man by the outstandingly anti-Shī‘ite name of Abū ‘Amr Shimr b. Hamdawayh al-Harawī.¹⁴⁶ This man is said to have been a religious scholar – “a praiseworthy religious scholar” [*āliman fadīlan*], in Yāqūt’s words – learned in both ḥadīth and linguistic studies, who had journeyed to Ḥirāq to learn from Ibn al-A‘rabī, al-Asma‘ī, al-Farrā’, and Abū Ḥātim al-Sijistānī, among others, and had then returned to Khurāsān.¹⁴⁷ We have here, again, a religious scholar who reportedly travelled on campaign with the ‘ayyār ruler (according to one source, Ya‘qūb even appointed Shimr to office¹⁴⁸): “It is said: [Shimr] joined the Amīr Abū ‘Amr Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth, and went with him to the area of Fārs, and brought with him [his] *Kitāb al-jīm*, but the water overflowed from Nahrawān on the encampments of Ya‘qūb and it [the book] drowned together with the other chattels which drowned.”¹⁴⁹ A later version expatiates on the merit of this lost work:

He authored a great book, based upon the letters of the alphabet and beginning with the letter *jīm*; no one who came before had ever surpassed its like, and no one who came after him ever equalled it. When he finished the book he withheld it, and not one of his companions [was allowed to] transcribe it; but there was no blessing to him in what he did [i. e., his jealous behaviour regarding the book]...¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ Al-Mizzī, *Tabdīb al-kamāl*, vol. 8, pp. 168-170.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 170.

¹⁴⁶ Shimr was according to tradition the name of the killer of Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī b. Abi Ṭālib, the third Imām, known among Shī‘ites as the “Lord of Martyrs.” Shimr was, to say the least, not the most popular figure in philo-‘Alid circles; see e. g. Abū’l – Faraj al-Isbahānī, *Maqātil al-Ṭalibiyīn*,, ed. Ahmad Saqr, Cairo, 1368/1949, pp. 116-118; Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi bi-l-Wafāyāt*, vol. 16, p. 180.

¹⁴⁷ Yāqūt, *Irshād al-ārīb ilā mārisfāt al-adīb*, vol. 4, pp. 262-263; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī, *Bughyat al-wu‘ā fi tabaqāt al-lughawiyīn wa’l-nuhā*, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, Cairo, 1384/1965, vol. 2, pp. 4-5; Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi bi-l-Wafāyāt*, vol. 16, p. 281; Jamāl al-Dīn Abū’l-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Yusuf al-Qiftī, *Inbāb al-ruwāt ‘alā anbāb al-nuhāt*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, Cairo, 1371/1952, vol. 2, p. 77; Abū’l-Barakāt Kamāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. al-Anbārī, *Nuzhat al-alibbā’ fi tabaqāt al-udabā’*, Baghdād, 1970, p. 151.

¹⁴⁸ Al-Qiftī, *Inbāb al-ruwāt*, p. 77: “fā-qalladahu ba’d d’mālīhi.”

¹⁴⁹ Yāqūt, *loc. cit.* and Ṣafadī, *loc. cit.* . According to al-Qiftī, *Inbāb al-ruwāt*, p. 78, it was at the time of Ya‘qūb’s encounter with al-Muwaffaq.

¹⁵⁰ Al-Anbārī, *loc. cit.*

Significantly, that same version tries to deny Shimr's support for Ya'qūb, claiming that this same author, who guarded his manuscript so jealously, inexplicably subsequently let "one of his relatives" take possession of his unique magnum opus. It was, therefore, the nameless relative who joined Ya'qūb, was appointed one of Ya'qūb's officials, travelled with Ya'qūb's army – and lugged his own kinsman's manuscript with him on all his travels, eventually losing it at Nahrawān.¹⁵¹ Here, again, we see a transparent attempt to try to deny or downplay the Sunni religious support for the Ṣaffārids.

Interestingly, Shimr's works are said to have included not only linguistic books but also a Qur'anic *tafsīr*, an unparalleled collection of unusual *ḥadīth*,¹⁵² and a "Kitāb al-ṣilah" – the latter book constituting, perhaps, although not necessarily, a possible indication that Shimr was interested in Jihād.¹⁵³ Shimr is specifically singled out for his Sunni leadership, being called in one source "one of the leaders of [the community of] tradition and consensus." [*min a'immat al-sunna wa'l-jamā'a*]¹⁵⁴

Such were the religious figures who were associated with Ya'qūb: staunchly Sunni, mainstream figures of impeccable repute, and often directly connected to the *mutaṭawwī* tradition to which we are maintaining that Ya'qūb belonged. Moreover, these people were no lukewarm, reluctant supporters; on the contrary, we see them actively involved in Ya'qūb's rule: they travel with him on his military campaigns, they actively work to replace Tāhirid rule with his, and they take over the recitation of the prayers in his home base when he is absent fighting. All of this indicates that the support of the hardline Sunni *'ulamā'* was offered willingly rather than grudgingly. Their devotion to the Ṣaffārid *'ayyār* cause is a strong indication that they could not possibly have viewed that cause in the same light in which current historical consensus regards those same *'ayyārs*.

Support for the Ṣaffārids within Tāhirid Circles

'Ulamā' were not Ya'qūb's only friends, however; all of our major sources state both that Ya'qūb was invited to take over Khurāsān by other prominent erstwhile Tāhirid supporters, and that both he and they felt that the province had to be rescued from what were in Sunni eyes religiously depraved elements. This emerges both in Ya'qūb's actions upon arresting Muḥammad b. Tāhir and also in his communications afterwards with the Caliph, who was obviously worried about Ya'qūb's becoming overmighty:

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Al-Qiftī, *loc. cit.*

¹⁵³ Yāqūt, *Irshād al-arīb*, *loc. cit.*; Suyūṭī, *loc. cit.*

¹⁵⁴ al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, vol. 19, p. 166.

[Ya‘qūb] interrogated [Muhammad b. Tāhir], then began to censure him and to reprove him for neglecting his duty ... Muhammad b. Tāhir and his household [*abl baytibī*] were jailed. News of this reached the central authorities [*al-sultān*], so they despatched Hātim b. Zayrak b. Salm to [Ya‘qūb]. On the 20th of Dhū'l-Qa‘da, the central authorities received Ya‘qūb’s letters. [When the messengers bringing these arrived], Ja‘far b. al-Mu‘tamid and Abū Aḥmad b. al-Mutawakkil – so it is related – held an audience ... [at which] the army commanders were present. Permission was granted Ya‘qūb’s messengers [to speak]. His messengers recalled the condition of the populace of Khurāsān, which had come to Ya‘qūb’s attention; how Khārijites and rebels had already overmastered it; and how Muhammad b. Tāhir had become impotent. They [also] recalled the correspondence of the people of Khurāsān with Ya‘qūb, imploring him to come help them, and that he had gone to them. [They mentioned that] when Ya‘qūb was more than ten Fārsakhs from Naysābūr, its people went to him and handed it over to him, so he entered the city.¹⁵⁵

These themes of Ya‘qūb’s reproof of Muhammad b. Tāhir’s laxness in his duty, the appeals made to him by members of the provincial elite, and, in striking contrast, the Caliph’s political considerations, appear in many of the major sources:

[Ya‘qūb] did not act nicely toward [Muhammad b. Tāhir], but rather censured him for his remissness in his work, seized Muhammad b. Tāhir and his household [*abl baytibī*] ... and sent to the Caliph reminding [him] of Muhammad b. Tāhir’s neglect of his duty, and that the people of Khurāsān had asked him to come to them. He [also] mentioned the ‘Alīd seizure of Tabarīstān, and continued in this vein, but he was condemned [anyway] for this, and ordered to restrict himself to what had been entrusted to him, and that he not behave toward him as rebels do.¹⁵⁶

The above passages are particularly interesting because they suggest that Ya‘qūb was more concerned with the beneficent regulation of the Muslim polity than was the Caliph. Indeed, the Caliph appears far more bothered by the idea of anyone else becoming powerful (i. e. Ya‘qūb) than he was by the fact that Khurāsān had already been disintegrating for several years, and, worse yet, taken over by Zaydis and Khārijites. Apparently, so important and evident was this aspect of Ya‘qūb’s move – that is, his concern to restore what a good *ghāzī* who associated with proto-Hanbalite *‘ulamā’* would consider the proper social and religious order – that all of the variant versions emphasize this theme as well:

Then Ya‘qūb arrived in Nishāpūr ... and sent his brother ‘Amr b. al-Layth to Muhammad b. Tāhir. [‘Amr] brought him into [Ya‘qūb’s] presence, who arrested him and had him shackled, berating him for his neglect of his province [*a‘mālibī*] and his failure in his guarding [the welfare of the Muslims]. [Ya‘qūb] then seized [Muhammad’s] entire household [*abl baytibī*], who numbered over 160 men, and bore them off to Sijistān. He gained mastery over Khurāsān, and appointed his representatives to the various districts.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Tabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 9, p. 507.

¹⁵⁶ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 262.

¹⁵⁷ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, pp. 262-263.

This same source iterates yet a third time Ya‘qūb’s motivation in doing away with the derelict Tāhirids:

It is said that the reason for Ya‘qūb’s taking possession of Nishāpūr was what we mentioned in the year 257/870f.; namely, the weakness of Muḥammad b. Tāhir, *Amīr Khurāsān*. When Ya‘qūb became certain [*tahqīqaqā*] about this, and that he was no [longer] capable of defending [Khurāsān or the Muslims], [Ya‘qūb] went to Nishāpūr. He wrote to Muḥammad b. Tāhir, informing him that he had resolved upon betaking himself to Tabaristān in order to execute what the Caliph had commanded regarding al-Ḥasan b. Zayd, who had gained mastery over it, and [promising] that he would not disturb anything in his [Muḥammad’s] district, nor any of his relations [*asbābīhī*].

Some of Muḥammad b. Tāhir’s *khāṣṣa* and some of his family [*ahl*], however, when they saw his rule slipping away [*idbār amrībī*], inclined towards Ya‘qūb. They entered into correspondence with him, inviting him to come, and playing down to Muḥammad b. Tāhir Ya‘qūb’s matter with regard to Nishāpūr, telling [Muḥammad] that he should not be afraid of him, thereby restraining him from being on his guard against him [Ya‘qūb]. Muḥammad relied upon what they said.¹⁵⁸

Even Gardīzī, who is ever loyal to the Sāmānid memory and therefore hostile to the Ṣaffārids, has preserved the record of Muḥammad b. Tāhir’s misrule:

Muḥammad b. Tāhir was negligent and improvident; he indulged in wine-drinking and was occupied [solely] with merry-making and festivities, to the point where because of his negligence Tabaristān was disturbed, and Hasan b. Zayd the ‘Alawī revolted in the year 251/865 ... [and by the year 256/870] Tabaristān and Gurjān were in a state of confusion.¹⁵⁹

He even includes the information that Muḥammad b. Tāhir’s friends and relatives had abandoned him, although he gives this fact a hostile twist when he first mentions it:

The sons of Muḥammad b. Tāhir’s uncle envied Muḥammad b. Tāhir, so they befriended Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth and emboldened him to the point where he made an attempt upon Khurāsān, took Muḥammad [prisoner], and himself sat [in the ruler’s seat] in Khurāsān.¹⁶⁰

Of course, after Gardīzī’s previous description of Muḥammad b. Tāhir’s rule, it does seem as though there were plenty of reasons other than envy for tiring of the latter’s reign. Later on, when describing the actual takeover, Gardīzī reveals for the first time that Muḥammad b. Tāhir’s **generals**, not just his envious cousins, also supported Ya‘qūb: “When Ya‘qūb came to Firhād, three days’ journey from Nishāpūr, the generals [*sarhangān*] and Muḥammad’s cousins all came before Ya‘qūb and offered their services except Ibrāhīm b. Aḥmad.”¹⁶¹

The most laudatory source even relates an apocryphal-sounding anecdote depicting Ya‘qūb as God’s instrument in putting an end to degenerate Tāhirid rule.

¹⁵⁸ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, p. 263.

¹⁵⁹ Gardīzī, *Zayn al-akhbār*, p. 5.

¹⁶⁰ Gardīzī, *Zayn al-akhbār*, p. 5.

¹⁶¹ Gardīzī, *Zayn al-akhbār*, p. 7.

Supposedly, Ya‘qūb was out strolling one day when he saw graffiti on the wall a poem comparing the Tāhirids to the Barmakids and stating “a great cry shall be heard among the Tāhirids/ the anger of The Merciful One shall fall upon them.” Ya‘qūb thereupon exclaimed that this must be a miracle from God, directing him to free the Muslims of the Tāhirids “and their tyranny” [*javwr*].¹⁶² Again, this story is important not because it is literally true (which it most likely is not), but rather for preserving a religious perception of Ya‘qūb as the righteous instrument of God’s wrath against inept rulers who do not fulfill their obligations toward the Muslim community.¹⁶³

This same account details another legendary episode that has given rise to much misinterpretation. According to this anecdote, certain people in Nishāpūr (we are not told precisely who) were murmuring that Ya‘qūb lacked a caliphal patent, and that this showed his Khārijite tendencies. Ya‘qūb therefore ordered all the notables and religious scholars to be called into his presence, whereupon he ordered the chamberlain to “bring that diploma of appointment of the Commander of the Faithful so that I may read it to them.” The chamberlain, so the story goes, brought Ya‘qūb a sword, which he waved around, frightening all those assembled. Ya‘qūb thereupon reassured them that he did not intend to kill anyone, but rather to show them that he did indeed possess the caliphal *‘abd*.

Then Ya‘qūb spoke: “Has the Caliph not been seated in Baghdaḍ by this sword?” They responded: “Yes.” He said: “This sword has placed me, too, in this position [which I have attained]; my diploma of investiture and that of the Commander of the Faithful are identical! ... I have arisen for justice upon the people of God, may He be blessed and exalted, and to seize the people of deviation from the way of iniquity [*fisq*] and of wickedness. If I were not thus, then God, may he be exalted, would not have given me these victories until now ...”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 220.

¹⁶³ Note the statement in Anon., *The Sea of Precious Virtues (Babr al-Favā’id): A Medieval Islamic Mirror for Princes*, tr. J. Meisami, Salt Lake City, 1991, pp. 215-216: “Know that unjust, tyrannical kings have robbed Islām of two things: They have condoned peace and hypocrisy, and accept unlawful wealth in return for not waging holy war. That peace is invalid, and the wealth that they take unlawful ... Whoever does such or condones it is no Muslim.”

¹⁶⁴ *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, pp. 222-223; significantly abbreviated version in Mirkhwānd, *Tārikh Rāwdat al-ṣafā*, vol. 4, p. 9. An echo of this famous story is contained in Gardīzī’s account as well: “Ya‘qūb came to Nishāpūr ... and Muḥammad b. Tāhir sent Ibrāhīm b. Ṣalīḥ al-Marvāzī with a letter to Ya‘qūb’s presence [*be-nazdīk-i Ya‘qūb*] to say: ‘If you have come by command of the Commander of the Faithful show your diploma and patent of investiture so that I can give charge of the province to you; but if not, go back.’ When the messenger arrived in Ya‘qūb’s presence and passed on the message, Ya‘qūb took out his sword from under his prayer mat and said: ‘This is my *‘abd* and standard.’ So Ya‘qūb came to Nishāpūr. He stopped in Shādyākh and took Muḥammad; [he] had [Muḥammad] brought before him, where he reproached him and took all his treasures.” (Gardīzī, *Zayn al-akhbār*, p. 7) Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, Oxford, 1964, p. 125, defines a *fāsiq* as a “sinner,” the opposite of an *‘ādil*. The author thanks David Cook for this reference.

The key to understanding this position – assuming that there is any historical basis to the anecdote¹⁶⁵ – lies in the latter half of Ya‘qūb’s statement. Rather than claiming that “might makes right,” Ya‘qūb was actually taking an extreme *ghāzī* position: Islam – not to mention the caliphate – is established by the sword, and the ruler approved and sanctioned by God is he who fights in God’s name to establish God’s proper order upon earth. In other words, the sword itself is no justification, but rather the fact that the sword is wielded on behalf of an absolute concept of justice; in Ya‘qūb’s own phrasing, “for justice upon the people of God … and to seize the people of deviation from the way of iniquity and of wickedness.”

Modern researchers, relying upon the accepted quietist norm in later Sunnism (i. e. that any ruler, no matter how awful, is better than armed conflict, and therefore must be submitted to), have tended to view askance any early Islamic militancy directed at political authorities in the name of *al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf*, suspecting it of unorthodoxy at best and Khārijism at worst. Yet it is not at all clear that this later Sunni norm was present in the ninth century; nor that, if it was present, it was widely accepted among the more radical proto-Sunnis, especially the more militant associates of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, among whom, as we shall soon see, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal himself may possibly be included. The ninth-century is littered with rulers, from caliphs on down, who usurped their position by force of arms, yet are still regarded as good Sunnis. This is an issue which we shall leave aside for the present; it is dealt with at length in the following chapter, in connection with the discussion of Ya‘qūb’s relations with the ‘Abbāsids.

But to return to Ya‘qūb, whom we left brandishing his sword before the Nīshāpūri notables: If Ya‘qūb was indeed what we are positing – a dedicated, even somewhat fanatical, self-appointed Jihadist – he could very well at this point have become frustrated with the current occupant of the ‘Abbāsid throne. After all, if Ya‘qūb had no qualms about replacing incompetent governors for the good of Islam as he understood it, then why not consider replacing incompetent or venal ‘Abbāsids with more worthy ‘Abbāsids, especially when this particular ‘Abbāsid was hampering the good fight?¹⁶⁶ Ya‘qūb apparently did try to bring

¹⁶⁵ One must also take into account, though, the possibility that this whole story is simply a *topos*; there are suspiciously similar stories told of other Islamic rulers whom our sources wish to discredit; *vide e. g.* the anecdote concerning the Fātimid Caliph al-Mu‘izz, of which Bernard Lewis remarks that “Its purpose is to depict al-Mu‘izz as an adventurer – an unscrupulous upstart who had gained power by force … But this is precisely what al-Mu‘izz was not, and nothing is less likely than that he would, in this brazen way, have declared himself an imposter.” (B. Lewis, “An Interpretation of Fātimid History,” *Colloque International sur l’histoire du Caire*, Cairo, 1999, pp. 287-295.) The present author has chosen to relate seriously to the story about Ya‘qūb, because what it relates is actually quite congruent with what we know of Ya‘qūb’s personality, style, and outlook.

¹⁶⁶ For a thorough discussion of the religious and historical issues involved in this, *vide infra*, Chapter Five.

home to the caliph the dire straits in which he had found Khurāsān, even in a manner he thought would personally interest the caliph, if only for power considerations; according to one source, it was at this point that Ya‘qūb sent the head of the Khārijite counter-caliph ‘Abd al-Rāhīm to Baghdađ.¹⁶⁷

There are differing accounts regarding the caliph’s reaction to Ya‘qūb’s suppression of the Tāhirids. According to Ṭabarī, the caliph, unmoved by Ya‘qūb’s recital of the woes of Khurāsān, ordered Ya‘qūb to abandon the province and return to his previous duties, on pain of being considered a rebel. Ya‘qūb’s emissaries were given robes of honor and sent back with this stern message.¹⁶⁸ This exchange highlights to some degree the relations between the caliph and Ya‘qūb. To have sent back such a message, in such a harsh tone, the caliph must have been fairly certain that Ya‘qūb would obey him, or at least not openly break with him, particularly given the caliph’s own precarious position at this juncture; after all, the Zanj rebels and Musāwir the Khārijite were pressing the caliph uncomfortably close to Baghdađ. The account also incidentally confirms the fact that, up until this point, Ya‘qūb had **not** been considered a rebel; otherwise, the caliph’s threat makes no sense.

Interestingly, one hostile source even depicts the caliph as having acquiesced in Ya‘qūb’s takeover of Khurāsān. This source, too, also confirms that the Tāhirids were by now highly unsuccessful as rulers:

A group gathered around [Ya‘qūb]; and, in time, because the ruler [i. e. Muḥammad b. Tāhir] was not victorious, he deceived him and expelled the governor of Tāhir b. ‘Abdallāh from Sijistān. He [Ya‘qūb] was appointed to the rulership and from there he came to Khurāsān and took the kingship of Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. Tāhir. His rule came to such a point that the Caliph made a pact with him and Khurāsān passed to him.¹⁶⁹

Yet another source settles for a position somewhere in the middle; the Caliph was not pleased about the suppression of the Tāhirids but was happy with Ya‘qūb’s battle against the Khārijites in Khurāsān:

[Ya‘qūb] ordered that the head of ‘Abd al-Rāhīm [*sic*], whom the Khārijites had killed, be taken and brought [to Ya‘qūb]. [Then Ya‘qūb] sent emissaries and a letter to al-Mu‘tamid, who was Commander of the Faithful, and to al-Muwaffaq his brother and heir apparent ... In the letters he recalled the arrest of Muḥammad b. Tāhir, and he sent the head of ‘Abd al-Rāhīm [*sic*]. Now, the Commander of the Faithful was not pleased with the imprisonment of Muḥammad b. Tāhir and was opposed to it, but he deigned to accept the head of ‘Abd al-Rāhīm [*sic*] and his killing. He gave a command that they carry the head of ‘Abd al-Rāhīm [*sic*] around Baghdađ, proclaiming: “This is the head of him who pretended to the Caliphate; Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth killed him and sent his head.” Then he answered nicely the letters [i. e. Ya‘qūb’s letters to the caliph and his brother]

¹⁶⁷ On this episode, *vide supra*.

¹⁶⁸ Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 9, p. 507.

¹⁶⁹ Ibn Isfandiyār, *Tārīkh-i Tabaristān*, p. 245.

because he had no choice, for Ya‘qūb had become powerful, [so that the caliph] saw the rightness of gaining his favour.¹⁷⁰

It is therefore unclear whether or not the caliph actually did remonstrate with Ya‘qūb to leave Khurāsān in the end. It seems, however, likely that he did, since Ya‘qūb was most likely obeying a caliphal injunction (if such there was) by his subsequent withdrawal from Nīshāpūr and Khurāsān, although he did not restore the degenerate Tāhirid dynasty. Once again Ya‘qūb’s actual behaviour, when closely examined, belies the current historical consensus: this is not the course of action that a land-hungry rebel or adventurer would have chosen at this juncture. According to two of our sources, he actually went back to Sīstān.¹⁷¹ Numismatic evidence would suggest that from there he went yet again on a *ghāzī* campaign to the East.¹⁷² According to other sources, he simply proceeded at this juncture – without *jihādī* detours to the East – to execute the original mission he had been given: to rid western Khurāsān of ‘Alid encroachment from Tābaristān.¹⁷³

The Campaign against the Zaydīs

The Zaydī Imāms found fertile ground for their *da‘wa* in the Caspian region, at least in part due to the misrule of Tāhirid representatives in the area.¹⁷⁴ In the year 250/864, the ‘Alids had taken the city of Rayy for the first time.¹⁷⁵ In 252/866, the Tāhirids had abandoned Rayy to the ‘Alids and paid them 2,000,000 dirhams in tribute.¹⁷⁶ The ‘Alids again took the city in 256/870, defeated the Tāhirid army which Muḥammad b. Tāhir had at last bestirred himself to send, and took over and plundered the surrounding province.¹⁷⁷ The following year – 257/871 – al-Hasan b. Zayd sent a representative to al-Rayy, “and he gained mastery over it. He acted very badly toward its inhabitants, tore out the gates of the city, which were of iron, and sent them to al-Hasan b. Zayd; things remained like this for over three years.”¹⁷⁸ That is, al-Rayy remained under Zaydī control until Ya‘qūb came to change that situation.

¹⁷⁰ *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 225.

¹⁷¹ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 266; Tābarī, *Tārikh*, vol. 9, p. 502.

¹⁷² See D. Tor, “A Numismatic History.”

¹⁷³ Even Qazvīnī allows that Ya‘qūb was appointed by the caliph to combat the Zaydīs; see *Tārikh-i guzīda*, p. 331.

¹⁷⁴ See M. S. Khan, “The Early History of Zaydī Shi‘ism in Daylamān and Gilān,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 125 (1975), p. 303; and M. Rekaya, “La Place des provinces sud-Caspienes dans l’histoire de l’Iran de la conquête arabe à l’avènement des Zaydites (16-250 H/637-864 J. C.): particularisme régional ou rôle ‘national’?” *Revisti Degli Studi Orientali* 48 (1973-1974), p. 148.

¹⁷⁵ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 134.

¹⁷⁶ Tābarī, *Tārikh*, vol. 9, p. 372; according to Ibn al-Athīr (*al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 177), 1,000,000.

¹⁷⁷ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 248.

¹⁷⁸ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 249.

Ya‘qūb’s clash with al-Hasan b. Zayd was also connected to the shadowy figure of ‘Abdallāh b. Muḥammad b. Ṣāliḥ al-Sijzī.¹⁷⁹ It is unclear who this man was and what (if anything) he stood for. He is first encountered, as previously mentioned regarding his activity in the year 258/872, when he had apparently taken control of the Herāt district (an area rife with *shurāt*).¹⁸⁰ Upon Ya‘qūb’s approach to the city, however, ‘Abdallāh fled to Nīshāpūr. We are, incidentally, informed in this connection how the people of Herāt felt towards the Ṣaffārid ruler, and this description does not support the ‘ayyār-as-robbert thesis: “Ya‘qūb entered Herāt, held court there, and was solicitous toward the people, both in words and action. The people of Herāt had already been followers of Ya‘qūb, and were deeply attached to him.”¹⁸¹

After fleeing before Ya‘qūb, ‘Abdallāh had besieged Nīshāpūr and apparently been admitted to the city by Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir. What the former’s position was at this court we can only guess; given the latter’s weakness, however, and what our sources tell us about Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir’s inability to resist ‘Abdallāh,¹⁸² it is probably not too far off the mark to assume that this man wielded a certain amount of influence there. This supposition is confirmed, moreover, by the explicit reports that ‘Abdallāh b. Muḥammad gave counsel to the Ṭāhirid.¹⁸³ When ‘Abdallāh b. Muḥammad realized, however, that the Ṭāhirid ruler was not going to fight against the Ṣaffārid forces (or anyone else, for that matter), he fled himself to Dāmaghān, and thence to Gurgān, where he joined with the ‘Alid Hasan b. Zayd and began gathering an army in order to fight Ya‘qūb.¹⁸⁴

Again, we do not know what this ‘Abdallāh was aiming for, nor what his religious convictions were. He was, however, obviously willing to cooperate with non-Sunnis in order to achieve his goals. Moreover, he seems to have been fiercely opposed to Ya‘qūb. ‘Abdallāh’s alliance with al-Hasan b. Zayd, over and above the caliphal mission to get rid of al-Hasan b. Zayd, apparently provided part of the immediate reason for Ya‘qūb’s march into the Caspian provinces – not necessarily because of any obsession on the latter’s part with ‘Abdallāh, but simply to break up a dangerous alliance.

One of Ya‘qūb’s tactics as reported by several chroniclers was to try to use the *divide et impera* strategy in order to break up the Zaydī – ‘Abdallāh b. Muḥammad alliance:

I was also told that Ya‘qūb sent to al-Hasan b. Zayd, requesting that he hand over ‘Abdallāh al-Sijzī to him, in order for him to withdraw, for he had come to Ṭabaristān only for his [‘Abdallāh’s] sake, not to fight [al-Hasan]. But al-Hasan b. Zayd refused to

¹⁷⁹ *Vide supra*.

¹⁸⁰ *Vide e. g.* al-İştakhri, *al-Masālik wa'l-mamālik*, pp. 266-267.

¹⁸¹ *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 217.

¹⁸² Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 266.

¹⁸³ *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 219.

¹⁸⁴ *Tārikh-i Sīstān*, p. 223.

hand [‘Abdallāh] over to him. Ya‘qūb then called upon him to fight. The two armies clashed, but there was no clear outcome, until al-Ḥasan was vanquished, and passed toward ... the land of Daylam. Ya‘qūb ... advanced from there toward Āmul, collecting from its inhabitants the year’s taxes.¹⁸⁵

This report has led several modern scholars to downplay the religious nature of Ya‘qūb’s campaigns, since they have understood the hostility between Ya‘qūb and ‘Abdallāh b. Muḥammad to be a personal enmity rather than a battle on Ya‘qūb’s part to suppress a dangerous rebel who was making common cause with the Zaydī Imām.¹⁸⁶ Moreover, they have taken at face value Ya‘qūb’s initial statement to al-Ḥasan b. Zayd that he had no intention of fighting him when, as we have seen, he had already been commanded by the caliph to deal with al-Ḥasan.¹⁸⁷ Thus, it is perfectly in accordance with the religious interpretation which we are here positing that Ya‘qūb arrived in Ṭabaristān in 260/873f. and set off into the heterodox Caspian Provinces in an attempt, ultimately unsuccessful, to capture the Zaydī Shi‘ite leader and extirpate heresy from the area.¹⁸⁸ At least one source states that the Daylamites themselves favoured Ya‘qūb: “In [the year 261/874f.] the Daylamites inclined toward Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth al-Ṣaffār, and abandoned al-Ḥasan b. Zayd, so al-Ḥasan burned down their houses and went to Kirmān.”¹⁸⁹

After finishing his campaign in the Caspian area Ya‘qūb returned to Nishāpūr to finish establishing order in Khurāsān. Apparently, his efforts to “command good and forbid evil” at least in some measure restored tranquillity to Khurāsān: various malefactors, when they realized that Ya‘qūb had come to stay, hastened to submit themselves to his rule. At this time, certain armed groups [*su‘lūk*]¹⁹⁰ of Khurāsān, who seem to have been organized in some fashion, took counsel together and said:

¹⁸⁵ Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīk b*, vol. 9, p. 509; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 268

¹⁸⁶ In this, it should be noted, the partisans of such a view are following the precedent of *Rāwḍat al-ṣafā* (vol. 4, pp. 12-13), which omits any mention of caliphal behest and plays up the ‘Abdallāh-Ya‘qūb enmity.

¹⁸⁷ *Vide supra*. Indeed, if the caliphal behest – or even Ya‘qūb’s religious reputation – was known to the Zaydī Imām, it may very well have been the reason for his refusal to hand over ‘Abdallāh.

¹⁸⁸ If Ya‘qūb failed to capture al-Ḥasan b. Zayd, it was certainly not for lack of trying. For the whole course of the campaign, including the insurmountable topographical and meteorological barriers to Ya‘qūb’s goal of taking al-Ḥasan, see Ibn Isfandiyār, *loc. cit.*, pp. 242-243; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 268-269.

¹⁸⁹ Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 5. Dhahabī’s account of Ya‘qūb’s anti-Zaydī campaign in *Siyar a’lām al-nubalā’* is treated below.

¹⁹⁰ The word *su‘lūk* is, like the word *‘ayyār*, quite murky in meaning. To attempt to elucidate it here, however, is far beyond the scope of this work. Suffice it to say that they were also some form of organized armed band, and probably in this context one which had been engaging in violent activities of one kind or another.

“This man is going to be master of the age [sāhib qirān],¹⁹¹ he has great power [or: fortune – *dawlati buzurg dārad*], he is a man of valour [*mardī mard*],¹⁹² and no one can triumph over him. The right thing for us to do [therefore] would be to go and place ourselves under his protection, so that during the period of his rule we can continue to live.”¹⁹³

The men thereupon submitted to Ya‘qūb and, typically, were treated kindly by him. One of these *su‘luk* was a man named Ahmad b. ‘Abdallāh al-Khujistānī, whom we shall meet again in Chapter Six.

Whether or not the specific story is accurate, it seems to preserve the historical memory of certain characteristics of Ya‘qūb’s rule in Khurāsān: a) that the various disorderly elements in Khurāsān realized they could no longer carry on with their disruptive activities, obviously because Ya‘qūb was concerned with public order (otherwise the robbers need not have feared to continue their activities); and b) that Ya‘qūb was perceived not only as invincible, but also as using his might in the service of the quintessential domestic Islamic duty of *al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf*.

Having satisfactorily begun to organize Khurāsān, Ya‘qūb was now forced to turn his attention to pressing matters in Fārs. It will be recalled that Ya‘qūb had left Fārs after his campaign there in 257/871, leaving the appointment of a governor to the Caliph.¹⁹⁴ Ya‘qūb was drawn into Fārs again in 261/874f., however, when Muḥammad ibn Wāṣil defied Caliphal orders to replace him, defeating and killing not only the governor but also a caliphal general, named Muflīḥ, who had subsequently been sent to forcibly remove the rebel.¹⁹⁵ The general Ibn Wāṣil killed, moreover, was one who had an illustrious family history of fighting religious deviants: not only had the dead man’s father fought against the ‘Alīds, but Muflīḥ himself had been the crack caliphal general sent to battle religious rebels, including both the Zanj and a dangerous Khārijite rebel who had taken over Mosul.¹⁹⁶

Ibn Wāṣil was now clearly in open rebellion against caliphal authority, and had even marched on al-Ahwāz, vowing to fight Samarra’s strong man, Mūsā b. Bughā.¹⁹⁷ This same strong man, moreover, felt too weak to battle Muḥammad b. Wāṣil: “When Mūsā [b. Bughā] saw the severity of affairs in this district, and the plethora of those gaining mastery over it, and that he was too weak to over-

¹⁹¹ Defined by Steingass as “Lord of the happy conjunction [of the stars]”; “a fortunate and invincible hero.”

¹⁹² Gaillard gives two definitions for *mardī*: 1) the quality of manliness or valour and 2) generosity or noblesse oblige; M. Gaillard, *Le Livre de Samak-e ‘ayyār: Structure et idéologie du roman persan médiéval*, Paris, 1987, pp. 17-26. The author thanks Marina Gaillard for having supplied a copy of her work.

¹⁹³ *Tarikh-i Sīstān*, pp. 224-225.

¹⁹⁴ *Vide supra*.

¹⁹⁵ İştakhrī, *al-Masālik wa'l-mamālik*, pp. 142-143.

¹⁹⁶ On Muflīḥ see Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, pp. 226-7; Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 9, p. 382; on Muflīḥ’s father ‘Abd al-Rahmān’s war against the Zanj see *ibid*, p. 504.

¹⁹⁷ Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 9, pp. 512-513.

come them, he asked to be released, and this was granted to him.”¹⁹⁸ Even worse, in the aftermath of a Zanj defeat of caliphal forces, the governor of al-Ahwāz retreated to ‘Askar Mukram and the Zanj rebels promptly took over the city.¹⁹⁹

In other words, the political situation was now critical: the Zanj were in possession of southern ‘Irāq and parts of Khūzistān, the rebel and erstwhile Khārijite Muhammad b. Wāṣil had control of Fārs, and the caliph’s strongman Mūsā b. Bughā had already admitted his inability to do anything to rectify matters. According to Iṣṭakhri, at this juncture one of the leading magnates of Fārs appealed to Ya‘qūb to save Fārs from the arbitrary rule of Muḥammad b. Wāṣil.²⁰⁰ In 261/875, therefore, Ya‘qūb entered Fārs and defeated Muḥammad b. Wāṣil.²⁰¹ He continued as far as al-Ahwāz, some sixty miles west of the Fārs-Khūzistān border, which he took, and then halted.²⁰²

It is important to note that Ya‘qūb did **not** continue into ‘Irāq; once again, the empirical evidence supports the ‘ayyār-as-mutatawwi’ interpretation rather than the ‘ayyār-as-unscrupulous-adventurer thesis; if Ya‘qūb’s aims and ambitions had been merely to aggrandize his own power, he could have continued straight into ‘Irāq at this point and easily overwhelmed the caliphal forces, which had proven themselves incapable of defeating even Ibn Wāṣil. The fact that he did not do so at this time would seem to indicate that his subsequent move upon ‘Irāq was the product of unfolding historical events rather than unbridled ambition.

One need not look far in order to discover what historical events might have motivated Ya‘qūb’s decision to challenge the caliph: around this time, “al-Mu‘tamid ordered the gathering of the Hajj from Khurāsān, and al-Rayy, and Ṭabaristān, and Jurjān; informed them that he had not made Ya‘qūb governor of Khurāsān; and that his entry into Khurāsān and his imprisonment of Muḥammad

¹⁹⁸ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 275.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 276; Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 9, p. 513.

²⁰⁰ al-Iṣṭakhri, *al-Masālik wa’l-mamālik*, pp. 142-143. The fact that this magnate is described as having had his own ulterior motive for inviting Ya‘qūb in – he was afraid for his own life under Ibn Wāṣil – does not in any way affect Ya‘qūb’s motivation. According to the much later and more negative *Rawdat al-ṣafā*, the “real” reason Ya‘qūb marched into Fārs after hearing of Ibn Wāṣil’s victory was that he ‘became desirous of’ ruling Fārs (vol. 4, p. 13). One can only wonder why Ya‘qūb was never seized by such a desire any of the previous times he had successfully invaded Fārs.

²⁰¹ Whereas Ibn al-Athīr attributes Ya‘qūb’s intervention solely to his “appetite to rule Fārs, and to take the money and treasure and weapons which Ibn Wāṣil had plundered from [the caliphal army he had defeated],” (*al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 276) Ṭabarī states that “The reason for this – according to what was told me – was that Ibn Wāṣil had killed ... the caliph’s administrator [āmil] in Fārs, and had taken over [the province].” (*Ta’rīkh*, vol. 9, p. 512). Al-Dhahabī (*Ta’rīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 6) merely states: “Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth went to Fārs. He clashed with Ibn Wāṣil, and Ya‘qūb routed him and smashed his army, taking from a castle [Ibn Wāṣil] had 40,000,000 dirhams, according to what has reached us.” Further on (p. 10) Dhahabī notes again, briefly: “In [this year] Ya‘qūb b. al-Layth subdued Fārs; its governor Ibn Wāṣil fled to al-Ahwāz, and Ya‘qūb grew powerful.”

²⁰² Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, vol. 7, p. 290.

b. Țāhir had not been by his command.”²⁰³ Țabarī adds that the pilgrims were ordered to disavow Ya’qūb.²⁰⁴

Interestingly, none of the sources which try to justify al-Mu’tamid’s turning against Ya’qūb can agree upon the caliphal motive. A later report, for instance, claims that the caliph sent out a message to “the amīrs of Khurāsān” that Ya’qūb had become an extremist Shī’ite who wished to destroy Islam [*mi-khwāhad ke dar dīn-i Islām shikast āward*], and that anyone of piety should therefore rebel against him.²⁰⁵ A different and unique report claims that the Caliph turned against Ya’qūb after having received complaints about the latter’s behaviour during the Caspian campaign:

Then Ya’qūb entered Jurjān, and he acted oppressively and unjustly ... so a group of the Jurjānites sought help in Baghdað against Ya’qūb, so that al-Mu’tamid resolved upon fighting him. He sent letters to the notables of Khurāsān censuring Ya’qūb, and [enjoining that] they should take pains for his removal. Then Ya’qūb wrote to al-Mu’tamid humbling himself and in a fraudulent manner, requesting to be invested with the governorship of the East. al-Mu’tamid granted this, and his brother al-Muwaffaq, because of their preoccupation with fighting the Zanj.²⁰⁶

In any case, it is a fact that the caliph, whatever his motivations, real or ostensible, did indeed turn against Ya’qūb openly. Apparently, Ya’qūb then reached the end of his patience with al-Mu’tamid, just as he had previously given up on the Tāhirids. Thus ensued the most spectacular event in Ya’qūb b. al-Layth’s career: his march against the Caliph al-Mu’tamid.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 288; cf. al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, vol. 20, p. 5: “In [the year 261/874f.] al-Mu’tamid wrote a letter read out to those pilgrims from Khurāsān and Rayy who were in Baghdað, whose content was: ‘I did not make Ya’qūb b. al-Layth governor of Khurāsān,’ and commanding that they disavow him.”

²⁰⁴ Țabarī, *Tārīkh*, vol. 9, p. 512. Mirkhwānd (*Rawdat al-safā*), vol. 4, pp. 12-13) also has the caliph summon the pilgrims [reading “*hajjīyyān*” for “*hajjibān*”] and order them to disavow Ya’qūb, ostensibly for his overthrow of what remained of the Tāhirids. Mirkhwānd, however, squarely places this event before Ya’qūb’s Fārs campaign.

²⁰⁵ Qazvīnī, *Tārīkh-i guzīda*, p. 331. Needless to say, there is absolutely no historical evidence that Ya’qūb was a Shī’ite of any sort – on the contrary.

²⁰⁶ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a’lām al-nubalā*, vol. 12, p. 514.