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The Death of al-‘Abbās b. al-Ma’mūn and a “Thwarted” Coup d’État¹

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This article focuses on the point at which the slave soldiers of al-Mu‘taṣim (r. A.H. 218–227/833–842 C.E.) rose to the political forefront and came to dominate the holder of the Caliphal seat. It is a study of the mechanisms by which the center of the state, and more specifically the Caliph, came to be their captives. D. Ayalon has argued that “the appearance of the Mamlūks as a major military force under the ‘Abbāsids roughly coincided with the beginning of the disintegration of their caliphate, a fact which prevented the caliphs from making proper use of them.”² Let us now explore that disintegration from a very different viewpoint. To begin, let me turn to al-Dīnawarī, who wrote:

¹ This article was first presented to the “Origins and Early Nature of Military Slavery in the Islamic World; International Workshop in Honor of David Ayalon,” December 18, 2008, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. There are many who deserve my thanks: Reuven Amitai and Amikam Elad for the invitation, and the participants and attendees for their comments and rigorous questions that greatly strengthened the paper. Amikam Elad deserves special thanks for reading and commenting on an earlier draft. The anonymous reviewers provided much-valued feedback as well. Any remaining faults are mine. I am also thankful to Colby College for the generous Social Science Grant 01.2236 that funded the research for this article.

² D. Ayalon, *Islam and the Abode of War* (Norfolk, 1994), 23 (sub. “The Military Reforms of Caliph al-Mu‘taṣim”).

And indeed he [al-Ma’mūn] had the oath of allegiance taken for his son al-‘Abbās b. al-Ma’mūn as heir apparent (*walī al-‘ahd*) after him and he delegated responsibility for Iraq to him; and when he died he was on the River Budandūn³ along with his brother Abū Ishāq, Muḥammad b. Hārūn al-Mu‘taṣim bi-llah. And he called the senior commanders and soldiers to join him and he called them to swear allegiance to him and they paid allegiance to him. And so he left from Tarsus until he arrived at the City of Peace. He then entered it and removed (deposed) al-‘Abbās b. al-Ma’mūn from it (the throne) and defeated him. The [important] people (*al-nās*) swore allegiance to him in it. And his arrival in Baghdad was at the beginning of the month of Ramadan of the year 218 (mid-September, 833). And so he stayed there two years and then moved along with his Turks to *surra man ra’ā*.⁴

³ I.e., at the modern village of Pozanti (Gr. Podandos) in Turkey. G. le Strange, *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate* (Cambridge, 1905), 134. For mention of Budandūn as a spring, see Ibn Khurrādādhbih, *Kitāb al-masālik wal-mamālik*, ed. M. J. De Goeje (Leiden, 1967), 110.

⁴ Abū Ḥanīfā Aḥmad b. Dāwūd al-Dīnawarī, *Kitāb al-akhbār al-ṭiwāl*, ed. V. F. Guirgass and I. I. U. Kratchkovsky (Leiden, 1888),

With the above account in mind, I would like to explore a two-part hypothesis: first, that Al-Mu‘taṣim with the aid of Ahmad b. Abī Du‘ād murdered al-Ma‘mūn;⁵ and second, that the Amorion campaign and subsequent purge of al-‘Abbās b. al-Ma‘mūn and of al-Ma‘mūn’s generals were the final consolidation of that act.⁶

The Death of al-Ma‘mūn

To elucidate the support for this hypothesis, let us now turn to the last five years of al-Ma‘mūn’s reign.⁷ In 213/828 the Caliph placed his son al-‘Abbās in charge of the frontier provinces bordering the Byzantines, apparently preparing him for the succession.⁸ By 215/830, without supplanting him, al-Ma‘mūn had effectively moved the court closer to the Byzantine frontier where he was on a campaign of conquest.⁹ He

396.13–20. *Al-nās* of course refers to the great notables of the court and not to the masses.

⁵ El-Hibri makes a passing and unparsed observation that is key for my argument: “Other evidence shows that al-Mu‘taṣim succeeded to the throne either by altering the caliph’s will, hastening the death of al-Ma‘mūn, forcing al-‘Abbās b. al-Ma‘mūn (the legitimate heir apparent) to renounce his rights of succession, or by doing all three.” El-Hibri regards the historicity of the entire episode with deep suspicion. T. El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge, 1999), 120. He reiterates this in more directly accusatory fashion on p. 141, n. 119. While acknowledging the validity of the skepticism, I perceive threads of historical connection worthy of exploration in a different fashion. Ghada Jayyusi-Lehn explores the death of al-Ma‘mūn and perceives him to have been murdered by al-Mu‘taṣim as well. G. Jayyusi-Lehn, “The Caliphate of al-Mu‘taṣim: Succession or Capture?,” in *Abbasid Studies II: Occasional Papers of the School of Abbasid Studies*, ed. J. A. Nawas (Leuven, 2010), 107–18.

⁶ Nawas assumes a connection between al-Mu‘taṣim’s succession and the imprisonment of al-‘Abbās but does not explore it. J. A. Nawas, “All in the Family? Al-Mu‘taṣim’s Succession to the Caliphate as Denouement to the Lifelong Feud Between al-Ma‘mūn and his Abbasid Family,” *Oriens* 38 (2010): 87–88. Marsham implies one as well. A. Marsham, *Rituals of Islamic Monarchy* (Edinburgh, 2009), 267.

⁷ In the interest of space I will not be discussing the *Mihna* here.

⁸ Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Ta‘rīkh al-rusul wa’l-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, 15 vols. (Leiden, 1879), iii, 1100. He placed him in charge of the Jazīra in 214 at the same time that he appointed al-Mu‘taṣim over Egypt. Aḥmad b. Abī Ya‘qūb b. Ja‘far al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta‘rīkh al-Ya‘qūbī*, vol. 2, ed. ‘A. A. Muḥannā (Beirut: Mu‘assasa al-‘Ulamī li’l-Maṭbū‘āt, 1993), 423.

⁹ Especially see al-Ṭabarī, *Ta‘rīkh*, iii, 1106. From Damascus, al-Ma‘mūn dispatched the leader for the Hajj. That person then went to Baghdad and launched it from there. As well (p. 1107), al-Ma‘mūn went to restore order in Egypt in Muharram 217 (Feb-

was not merely engaging in *pro forma* seasonal raiding, but was intent on capturing and holding a position north of the Cilician Gates. By 216/831, Ṭuwāna/Tyana was being used as an operational staging site.¹⁰

The campaign of 218/833 was of a similar character. Al-Ma‘mūn set off for the Byzantine frontier from Tarsus after having an exchange of letters with the Byzantine Emperor the year before (217). Given the tenor of both letters (as recorded in al-Ṭabarī), al-Ma‘mūn was spoiling for a fight.¹¹ At about the same time, al-‘Abbās was dispatched to fortify a large installation at Ṭuwāna.¹² It was massive and intended as a permanent foothold. Al-Ṭabarī tells us that the walls had a circumference of three *farsakhs*, which is between fifteen and twenty kilometers. After having passed through the Cilician Gates on his way to join forces with al-‘Abbās at Ṭuwāna, al-Ma‘mūn paused at the halfway point at Budandūn.¹³

While there, al-Ma‘mūn died under most suspicious circumstances. According to al-Ṭabarī, while resting he ate some newly arrived dates and became ill.¹⁴ The

ruary–March 832) and afterwards “returned to Syria.” Al-Ma‘mūn had reason to avoid Baghdad and he did so, spending approximately half of his reign elsewhere. Also see P. von Sivers, “Taxes and Trade in the ‘Abbāsīd Thughūr, 750–962/133–351,” *JESHO* 25 (1982): 78–79.

¹⁰ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta‘rīkh*, iii, 1104.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, iii, 1109–11. For an in-depth discussion of the letters, see V. De Gifis, “Qur’ānic Rhetoric in the Politics of al-Ma‘mūn’s Caliphate” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2008), 189–221.

¹² al-Ṭabarī, *Ta‘rīkh*, iii, 1111–12. Al-Mas‘ūdī mentioned Ṭuwāna in the same context. ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa ma‘ādin al-jawhar*, v. 4, ed. M. H. Al-Na‘ṣān (Beirut: Dar el-Marefah, 2005), 38. Yāqūt mentioned al-Ma‘mūn’s building program and that it was meant to house a great many troops. He also mentioned that al-Mu‘taṣim destroyed it. Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu‘jam al-Buldān*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mar‘ashlī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ihiya al-Turath al-‘Arabī, 1997), s.v. “Ṭuwāna.” Kennedy also interprets the fortification program as part of the preparations for a major operation for conquest. H. Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 210.

¹³ Budandūn is almost exactly halfway between Tarsus and Ṭuwāna. Al-Ṭabarī said that it was also the name of a river. Al-Mas‘ūdī said that it was a spring that formed a river. Al-Ya‘qūbī describes it as between Tarsus and Lu‘lu‘a (Loulon), which is on the road to Ṭuwāna. al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta‘rīkh*, v. 2, 429. For the identification of Lu‘lu‘a, see Strange, *Lands of the Eastern Caliphate*, 134, 139.

¹⁴ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta‘rīkh*, iii, 1134–36. Al-Mas‘ūdī provided a different version which says that he was splashed with very cold water, caught a chill and died as a result. al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, v. 4, 39–40. El-Hibri discusses the different versions from a literary standpoint, highlighting their suspiciousness. El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 112–21.

narrator takes pains to assure the reader that both he and al-Muʿtaṣim ate the dates and became ill at the same time as al-Maʿmūn.¹⁵ Because his death on the frontier was entirely too convenient for al-Muʿtaṣim, the point of the interjection was to obviously and plausibly allay suspicions that al-Maʿmūn was poisoned. Al-Maʿmūn died on Rajab 17, 218/August 10, 833¹⁶ and was buried in Tarsus.¹⁷ It is usually thought that after the disastrous attempt to appoint ʿAlī al-Riḍā as heir, al-Maʿmūn had failed to fill this position until very near the end of his life.¹⁸ Nawas argues that as a result of family pressures, al-Maʿmūn was left little choice but to designate al-Muʿtaṣim as heir.¹⁹ Immediately upon his death, al-Muʿtaṣim became Caliph.

Al-Ṭabarī, among others, tells us that al-ʿAbbās was there when al-Maʿmūn died.²⁰ Gordon has asserted the entirely reasonable proposition that al-Muʿtaṣim took advantage of the untimely death of a caliph (his brother) to seize control.²¹ However, upon closer examination, something else is at work here. Despite being labeled by al-Ṭabarī as an oration, al-Maʿmūn’s will is reflective, closely worded, argued and thought out, and not the words of a dying man moving in and out of lucidity.²² This text deserves closer scrutiny than it has received up to this point. Under the circum-

stances, the will was either composed in advance or *ex post facto* by someone other than al-Maʿmūn.

Let us consider the latter possibility. The most likely culprit is Ahmad b. Abī Duʿād, especially as he was given such a prominent place and continuing role by the will itself.²³ The secondary literature most often presents him as al-Maʿmūn’s deputy, but there is evidence that questions that labeling. Ibn Abī Duʿād and al-Muʿtaṣim had an established working relationship during al-Maʿmūn’s reign. During his assignment to al-Muʿtaṣim’s camp (215/830–31) in the mission to Egypt, Ibn Abī Duʿād proved himself loyal to al-Muʿtaṣim in defiance of al-Maʿmūn.²⁴ In Ibn Ḥajar’s account, when he was appointed to the *maẓālim* in al-Muʿtaṣim’s camp, Ibn Abī Duʿād was not an important person. Ironically, he was recommended to al-Maʿmūn by Yaḥyā b. Aktham. Ibn Abī Duʿād’s prominent role in the *Miḥna* began during al-Muʿtaṣim’s reign. He was not chief judge under al-Maʿmūn; that was a position that he acquired after the latter’s death. As all of the later ʿAbbāsid caliphs were descended from al-Muʿtaṣim, there would be little incentive for contemporaries to point out the forgery.

The Will

Let us now examine the will in depth. The first part is relatively uncontroversial, giving prescriptions about burial.²⁵ However, for the rest of the will, its author conveniently knew what al-Muʿtaṣim would do next, both immediately and over the course of the following

¹⁵ Jayyusi-Lehn also notes this. G. Jayyusi-Lehn, “The Caliphate of al-Muʿtaṣim,” 112.

¹⁶ Al-Ṭabarī also said Rajab 18. al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1140. Al-Yaʿqūbī said the 17th. al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh*, v. 2, 429. Al-Dīnawarī said it was Rajab 8 with which al-Masʿūdī agrees. al-Dīnawarī, *al-akhbār*, v. 1, 396. al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, v. 4, 40.

¹⁷ See M. Cooperson, “The Grave of al-Maʿmūn in Tarsus,” in *ʿAbbasid Studies: Occasional Papers of the School of ʿAbbasid Studies, Cambridge, 6–10 July 2002*, ed. J. Montgomery (Leuven, 2004).

¹⁸ For more on that appointment see D. G. Tor, “An Historiographical Re-examination of the Appointment and Death of ʿAlī al-Riḍā,” *Der Islam* 78 (2001); and M. Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography* (Cambridge, 2000), chapter 3. Madelung implies that the decision to choose al-Muʿtaṣim was almost flippant. W. Madelung, “New Documents Concerning al-Maʿmūn, al-Faḍl b. Sahl and ʿAlī al-Riḍā,” in *Studia Arabica et Islamica*, ed. W. al-Qāḍī (Beirut, 1981).

¹⁹ Nawas, “All in the Family?”

²⁰ al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1135–36.

²¹ M. Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords* (Albany, NY, 2001), 47.

²² al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1136–40. Van Ess raises questions about the authenticity of the will. J. van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra* (New York, 1991), v. 3, 486–88. Cited by Nawas, “All in the Family?,” 87, n. 40; I thank the anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this. El-Hibri and Cooperson also make the same observation. El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 120. M. Cooperson, *Al-Maʿmūn* (Oxford,

2005), 122. According to Nawas, Jayyusi-Lehn has addressed this in her dissertation, which I have not had a chance to read.

²³ El-Hibri, without going into depth, notes some of the provisions of the will, the relationship to Ibn Abī Duʿād, and their almost prescient nature. He states that they were most likely written at the court of al-Muʿtaṣim “at the behest of” Ibn Abī Duʿād. El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 121.

²⁴ M. Tillier, *Les cadis d’Iraq et l’état abbasside (132/750–334/945)* (Damas: IFPO, 2009), 556. Citing and translating Aḥmad b. Abī Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Rafʿ al-ʿisr ʿan quḍāt Miṣr*, ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad ʿUmar (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanjī bi-al-Qahirah, 1998), 47.

²⁵ al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1136–40. Unfortunately, the copy that we have of the *Kitāb Baghdad* that survives breaks off without including this. Aḥmad Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr, *Sechster Band des Kitāb Bagdad*, ed. H. Keller (Leipzig, 1908). El-Hibri speculates that the funerary provisions can be “connected with the question of the ‘torment of the grave’ . . .” El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 121.

few years. Either al-Muʿtaṣim was a complete slave to his brother's will, or it was written at a later date.²⁶

We should now go through its provisions point by point; after the burial instructions, there are thirteen of them. First, al-Muʿtaṣim was exhorted to hurry back to Baghdad.²⁷ All of the sources agree that this is what he did.²⁸ He entered it on 1 Ramadan 218/30 September 833, about forty days after al-Maʿmūn's death. The will indicates that he had to do this to secure his position. Most sources recount that he left in great haste, with some indicating that he did so in fear of the officers by whom he was surrounded. Those sources say that they were upset that al-ʿAbbās had been passed over and were inclined to pledge their support to him. Al-Muʿtaṣim had to work hard to forestall this possibility. He used the entire forty-day mourning period to march back to Baghdad. Although there is no discussion of mourning rituals, neither is it stated what took so long. The "Fragmenta," which so often is in agreement with al-Ṭabarī's version of events, does not differ much here; where it does differ, however, is intriguing:

He was Abū Ishāq Muḥammad b. Hārūn al-Rashīd, and his mother was Mārīda and she was an *umm walad*. The oath of allegiance was taken to him on the day al-Maʿmūn died and he was with him in Tarsus in Rajab of the year 218.²⁹ At the time when al-Maʿmūn died the army rioted against al-Muʿtaṣim and they demanded al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʿmūn. They acclaimed al-ʿAbbās by the name of Caliph. And so al-Muʿtaṣim sent for al-ʿAbbās. And he took the oath of allegiance to him. Al-ʿAbbās went to the army and he said to them: "what is this stupid affection, indeed I took the oath of allegiance to my uncle and handed the Caliphate to him." The army became quiet and al-Muʿtaṣim, with al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʿmūn, quickly and in fear for himself from the commanders, left for Baghdad. Indeed they were clamoring in distress about him and they demanded al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʿmūn. And so he

²⁶ El-Hibri observes this as well; *ibid*.

²⁷ al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1138.

²⁸ For a sampling, see *ibid.*, iii, 1164. al-Dīnawarī, *al-akbbār*, 396. M. J. De Goeje, *Fragmenta historicorum arabicorum*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1869), v. 1, 380. ʿAbdallāh b. Muslim Ibn Qutayba, *al-Maʿārif*, ed. Tharwat ʿUkāsha (Miṣr: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1969), 392. al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh*, v. 2, 430.

²⁹ Note that the place of death is different.

[al-Muʿtaṣim] heaped scorn on them and he approached Baghdad on Saturday the first day of Ramadan in the year 218.³⁰

Note that the army continued to clamor even after al-ʿAbbās's statement. It is very interesting that al-ʿAbbās was described as having handed over the Caliphate. This of course implies that he was in possession of it and that it was his to give.³¹ Al-Ṭabarī said the exact same thing, with the exception that in his account al-Muʿtaṣim was not fleeing the imperial army in fear for his life.³² Ibn Aʿtham, also giving much the same information, added that the commanders from whom he was fleeing had accused him of murdering al-Maʿmūn.³³ That he was accused by some of the commanders makes sense of his hurried departure for Baghdad.³⁴ At the very least, the sources provide compelling circumstantial evidence that al-Maʿmūn was murdered. Ibn al-Ṣābiʿ and Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa both quoted al-Ṣulī's *kitāb al-awraq* as saying that al-Muʿtaṣim interfered deliberately in al-Maʿmūn's medical care, leading directly and intentionally to his death.³⁵ Those sources implicated al-Muʿtaṣim's occasional, but not regular, doctor, Ibn Māsawayh.

³⁰ De Goeje, *Fragmenta*, v. 1, 380. Ibn al-Athīr's account is similar. ʿIzz al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī'l-taʾrīkh*, ed. C. J. Tornberg (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1965), v. 6, 439. Al-Masʿūdī mentioned tensions between al-Muʿtaṣim and al-ʿAbbās at the succession. al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, v. 4, 42.

³¹ Also note the literary tension embedded in "and so al-Muʿtaṣim sent for al-ʿAbbās. And he took the oath of allegiance to him" (see note 30). Who exactly was pledging allegiance to whom? The next sentence resolves the tension.

³² al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1164.

³³ His account is similar to that found in the *Fragmenta*, with the exceptions that al-Muʿtaṣim did not take al-ʿAbbās with him but the author included the accusation of murder. Aḥmad Ibn Aʿtham al-Kufī, *Kitāb al-futūḥ* (Hyderabad: Maṭbaʿat Majlis Dāʿirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniya, 1968–1975), v. 8, 343–44. Cited and translated by Gordon, *Breaking of a Thousand Swords*, 48.

³⁴ At another point, Yaḥyā b. Aktham accused al-Muʿtaṣim in front of al-Maʿmūn of trying to break his oath of allegiance. al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh*, v. 2, 423. I thank Amikam Elad for this reference.

³⁵ The quotations are practically verbatim of each other, leading to the conclusion that both were quoting from al-Ṣulī. Unfortunately, I have been unable to locate this in the *kitāb al-awraq*. Muḥammad b. Hilāl al-Ṣābiʿ, *al-Hafawāt al-nādīra*, ed. Ṣ. al-Ashtar (Damascus: Maṭbūʿat majmaʿ al-lughā al-ʿarabiya bi-dimashq, 1967), 183–85. Aḥmad b. Qāsim Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, *ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aʿyibāʾ*, ed. M. B. ʿUyūn al-Sūd (Beirut: Dār al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah, 1998), 231. Also see ʿAlī b. Yūsuf al-Qifī, *Taʾrīkh al-ḥukamāʾ*, ed. J. Lippert (Leipzig, 1903), 391. El-Hibri cites al-Ṣābiʿ. El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 141 n. 119. I thank Michael Cooperson for the reference to Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa.

Given the circumstances and outcome, the culprit and his motives appear obvious. Add to this the discontent registered by the officers and that the purge with which the Amorion campaign was concluded was so complete and severe that there must be a connection between the events. Ibn Qutayba’s account is eye-opening:

He is Muḥammad b. Hārūn and he was given the *kunya* Abū Ishāq and his mother was Mārīda, a slave girl and Abū Ishāq was with his brother and al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʿmūn at the time when he died in the land of the Byzantines. The [important] people (*al-nās*) wanted to pledge allegiance to al-ʿAbbās but al-ʿAbbās rejected it and ceded to Abū Ishāq the command [rulership] and then Abū Ishāq turned his face towards Baghdad quickly and he was fearful for himself about a group of the commanders who were disquieted by him. And thus he arrived at it at the beginning of the month of Ramadan of the year 218/833. He stayed in it two years, then he moved to *surra man raʿā* in the year 220/835 . . . And then Byzantium attacked Zibaṭra. And so Abū Ishāq turned his face towards *ghazw* in Jumāda I of the year 223/838 and he conquered Amorion in the month of Ramadan of this year then after that he made preparations to leave and he fell upon al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʿmūn and ʿUjayf on his way. He approached *surra man raʿā* in Dhū al-Hijja of that year. And Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī died in *surra man raʿā* in the month of Ramadan of the year 224/839 and he gibbeted al-Afshīn in the year 226/840–41.³⁶

Through context, Ibn Qutayba connected al-Muʿtaṣim scurrying back to Baghdad in fear for his life to the raid on Amorion. Given the distance, something around forty days is hardly scurrying quickly. As well, Ibn Qutayba made no mention of a coup attempt. He merely stated that al-Muʿtaṣim assaulted al-ʿAbbās and ʿUjayf b. ʿAnbasa without giving an explicit reason why.³⁷ However, his phrasing and connective clausuring draws a line between the succession, the assault and the expiration of troublesome, yet powerful individuals. The reader is led to infer that al-Muʿtaṣim did this because the officers wanted to swear loyalty to

al-ʿAbbās instead of him and they continued to do so after his renouncing it. In the end, al-ʿAbbās, it seems, in an effort to avoid another civil war, opted to bide his time and take the oath of allegiance.³⁸ He was also faced with the problem that while he had arrived on the scene in time for his father’s death, he had done so largely unaccompanied by the bulk of his forces who had remained in Ṭuwāna. This would have given al-Muʿtaṣim significant leverage over him but would not have extirpated residual support for al-ʿAbbās. This also explains the next point in the will.

The second provision of the will was that, with reference to the Byzantines, al-Muʿtaṣim should “be mindful/wary of these people in whose front yard you are and so do not ignore them at any time.”³⁹ The destruction of the fortifications under construction at Ṭuwāna and the removal of its colonists was al-Muʿtaṣim’s first act as Caliph.⁴⁰ Al-Azdī and al-Ṭabarī agree that he did this before heading for Baghdad. This would make sense of the forty-day journey from Tarsus to Baghdad. As noted above, al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʿmūn, under orders from his father, had been fortifying the town and settling new residents in it. It served as a forward base of operations but was more than a mere hilltop-outpost. Significant investment had been made to insure that it was added permanently to the Caliphate. Al-Muʿtaṣim’s destruction of it and the removal of all weaponry could be interpreted as an effort to pull back from an exposed position leaving nothing usable for the enemy. Or, equally likely, it could be interpreted as the destruction of a possible base of operations for a powerful ʿAbbāsīd rival to whom many in the military leadership wished to swear allegiance.

Note that Ṭuwāna was not as exposed a forward position as is often asserted. In 216/831 there were a series of very successful raids originating from there deep into Byzantine territory.⁴¹ Thus it was under continuous occupation and had been for some time.

³⁸ Al-Dhahabī said that ʿAbbās was the first to take the oath to al-Muʿtaṣim. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Taʾrīkh al-Islām*, ed. ʿU. Tadmurī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1990), volume for the years 211–20, 27.

³⁹ al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1138. However, as Amikam Elad pointed out in his comments on a draft of this paper, al-Maʿmūn could have been referring to the inhabitants of Baghdad.

⁴⁰ Ibid., iii, 1164. Yazīd b. Muḥammad al-Azdī, *Taʾrīkh al-Mawṣil*, ed. A. Habibah (Cairo: al-Majlis al-Aʿlā li-l-Shuʿūn, al-Islāmiyya, 1967), 415; al-Dhahabī, *Taʾrīkh*, vol. for the years 211–20, 28. Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, v, 6, 439.

⁴¹ al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1104.

³⁶ Ibn Qutayba, *al-Maʿārif*, 392.

³⁷ Of course, his purpose was not to be comprehensive, and leaving such details out could have been an editorial decision.

This supports the contention that al-Ma'mūn ordered al-ʿAbbās to reinforce and strengthen an already existing emplacement. At the same time that he ordered al-ʿAbbās to fortify and expand it, al-Ma'mūn levied troops from Syria and Egypt. A large number of men were placed under al-ʿAbbās' command with him in Ṭuwāna.⁴² Al-ʿAbbās was modifying the fortifications to accommodate the addition of this new larger contingent on a permanent basis. Though forward and more exposed than other areas, when al-ʿAbbās was given this task, the fort had been operational for some time. As such, it was unlikely to have been in any greater danger from the Byzantines at the death of al-Ma'mūn than before, particularly since a massive force was already garrisoned there in preparation for an intended assault towards Constantinople.⁴³

Given the description of the number of troops, one easily infers that this was to be an expedition of the same size if not larger than the one that al-Mu'taṣim made against Amorion. Three months before he died, al-Ma'mūn set his son up in a fortified position with a large army. The army would gain experience, and al-ʿAbbās would gain renown in what was going to be a major expedition against the Byzantines. Al-ʿAbbās would have strengthened his hand in establishing himself as a legitimate ruler and continuator of his father's policies (of course, not reckoning that his death was imminent). His credentials as a military commander and *ghazi* Caliph would be secured. Al-Mu'taṣim would need these credentials as well, and would pursue a similar course of action to attain them. Given the circumstances of al-Mu'taṣim's ascension to the throne, taking this opportunity away from al-ʿAbbās was of paramount importance.⁴⁴

While primogeniture was not the established mechanism for inheritance of leadership, almost every prior Caliph, when able to express his wishes concerning succession, indicated a preference for his own son. Succession by a brother was not by any means anomalous but neither was it a foregone conclusion. Clearly

⁴² Ibid., iii, 1111–12. al-Azdī, *Ta'rikh al-Mawṣil*, 412 indicated that all of them were sent with al-ʿAbbās to Ṭuwāna.

⁴³ Al-Ya'qūbī also mentioned that Amorion, as it was on the way, was also a target of this mission. al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, v. 2, 428–29. Also see al-Azdī, *Ta'rikh al-Mawṣil*, 414–15. Bonner and von Sivers note the expedition. M. Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence and Holy War* (New Haven, 1996), 148. Sivers, “Taxes and Trade,” 78.

⁴⁴ That he took control of the frontier provinces away from al-ʿAbbās at the same time reinforces my point. al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, v. 2, 430.

al-Ma'mūn was establishing a rivalry between the two main contenders for the throne.⁴⁵ Given recent precedents, al-Mu'taṣim must have discerned the prospects of being sidelined. As Nawas points out, both al-ʿAbbās and al-Mu'taṣim were equally qualified for succession.⁴⁶ That al-Mu'taṣim was older does not necessarily mean that he had an edge; consider al-Manṣūr's succession struggle with his uncle ʿAbdallāh and the sidelining of ʿĪsā b. Mūsā.⁴⁷

Now we turn to the third and fourth provisions of the will. Al-Mu'taṣim was told to pursue Bābak and the Khurramiyya, along with a description of the type of commander for the task. Al-Afshin is not named, but the description given applies well to both him and his behavior on that campaign. The will also specifies the behavior of the Caliph. It is a suspiciously prescient account of how both al-Afshīn and al-Mu'taṣim would conduct themselves in the course of the campaign. This argues for a dating of the forgery of the will to the period after al-Ma'mūn's death and before al-Afshīn's disgrace in 225/839.

Fifth, the will warned that “exhortation” must be backed up by action. Al-Mu'taṣim would have to follow the same path as his brother to prove his credentials, but it was vital that he brought them to a successful conclusion. As no specific target was mentioned, nor was glorious victory predicted (as with the above concerning the Khurramiyya), this helps to confirm my dating of the document and narrows it even further to a point before the launch of the Amorion campaign.

At this point there is a break in the will, which notes that al-Ma'mūn's condition worsened and he summoned his brother to his bedside. This serves the purpose of signaling that the designation of his brother as heir was in place and not the product of a deathbed pronouncement. The narrative in al-Ṭabarī explicitly places the first half of the will chronologically while al-Ma'mūn was still alive and al-Mu'taṣim was elsewhere. The interjection seems to address the legal problem that one could not issue or even make changes to a will from the deathbed.⁴⁸ If he issued the proclamation and then promptly died, the missive would have been

⁴⁵ For more, see Marsham, *Rituals of Islamic Monarchy*, 266.

⁴⁶ Nawas, “All in the Family?,” 78, n. 3.

⁴⁷ For more on that context, see H. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 2nd ed. (London, 2004), 129–30, 136; and Marsham, *Rituals of Islamic Monarchy*, 196–97, 205–207.

⁴⁸ For more on inheritance rules, see J. Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford, 1964), 169–74; and K. Viktor, *Between God and the Sultan: A History of Islamic Law* (Oxford, 2005), 318–21.

invalid. Summoning al-Muʿtaṣim underscores that al-Maʿmūn had made his designation well in advance of his death throes.⁴⁹ Al-Ṭabarī explicitly says this before recounting the text of the will.

Addressing the deathbed issue at this point introduces a problem for points six through thirteen, which follow the interjection. These could be later interpolations that solved the deathbed issue, while also accounting for al-Mutawakkil’s actions regarding Ibn Abī Duʿād and a continuing concern over the independent position of the Ṭāhirids.⁵⁰ But, given that it was the will of a Caliph, a document publicly used to validate the claim of the presiding Caliph, how likely is it that such a visible emendation would have left no other traces? It is more likely that it was a device to attest to the authenticity of the will.

The sixth provision chided al-Muʿtaṣim to be just, so that the change in succession was justified “as I have transferred it from other than you to you.”⁵¹ Bosworth in his translation glosses “it” as meaning “[the Messenger of God’s protection]” whereas I read this as an acknowledgement that al-ʿAbbās had already been declared *walī al-ʿabd* as al-Dīnawarī asserted.⁵² To affirm the orality and thus the authenticity of the document, al-Muʿtaṣim interrupted the dying Caliph to say that he would do as he had been told.

Continuing with the seventh point, al-Muʿtaṣim was told to rely on ʿAbdallāh b. Ṭāhir. My assessment is that this is merely what it purports to be, an exhortation not to jumble the power structure of the state. Of course, al-Muʿtaṣim would do just that on the Amorion campaign; but the author of the will appeared not to know that. The eighth point seems to confirm my reading of the previous, that al-Muʿtaṣim should rely on the Ṭāhirid Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm as his lieutenant, which he also would. Ishāq was an ally of Ibn Abī Duʿād and would maintain his position at the center of power until his death in 235/850.⁵³

For the ninth point, al-Muʿtaṣim was admonished that the ʿAbbāsīd family was not qualified for much

and that he should avoid them. The will told him that he could rely on only one somewhat obscure member of the family and to appoint him (ʿAbd al-Wahhāb) as its leader.⁵⁴ This is what one would expect from al-Maʿmūn but not from al-Muʿtaṣim’s coterie, as they represented, in effect, a rapprochement within the ʿAbbāsīd family.⁵⁵ Ironically, al-Muʿtaṣim did in the end take this advice, as he became increasingly more reliant on his personal force, the Turkish guard.

In the tenth provision, very famously he was told to keep Ahmad b. Abī Duʿād close and to put his trust in him. Many have mistaken this to be an explicit admonishment to continue the *Miḥna*, which it was not. Ibn Abī Duʿād was not yet identified as the leader of the *Miḥna*. Tellingly, this is his first appearance in al-Ṭabarī’s chronicle. Of the four named figures in the will that al-Muʿtaṣim was told to rely upon, Ibn Abī Duʿād was the only one in a position to author the will. The following point helps to substantiate this.

The eleventh point of the will said to choose a good Vizier. This is tantalizing, yet problematic, because it was immediately followed by point twelve, in which Yaḥyā b. Aktham, the rival, immediate predecessor, and successor to Ibn Abī Duʿād as chief *qāḍī* was specifically singled out for opprobrium. This would have been an odd commentary coming from al-Maʿmūn, as he had two years before placed Yaḥyā b. Aktham in charge of a very successful raid into Byzantine territory in the year 216/831.⁵⁶ It would not have been odd coming from al-Muʿtaṣim and Ibn Abī Duʿād, however, with whom bad blood existed.⁵⁷ As Yaḥyā’s and al-ʿAbbās’ positions strengthened, those of Ibn Abī Duʿād and al-Muʿtaṣim weakened. This could be read as the motive for the timing of murdering al-Maʿmūn. Point twelve serves as prime evidence that Ibn Abī Duʿād was the author of the will. However, it is important to underline that Yaḥyā b. Aktham was not the vizier. He was the chief *qāḍī*. Of course Ibn Abī Duʿād would have known this, as would any

⁴⁹ al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1135–36.

⁵⁰ El-Hibri briefly mentions the possibility of the will having been altered later. El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 120–21.

⁵¹ al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1138.

⁵² Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *The Reunification of the ʿAbbāsīd Caliphate*, trans. C. E. Bosworth, vol. 32 (Albany, NY, 1987), 229.

⁵³ For more on this period, see J. P. Turner, “The End of the Miḥna,” *Oriens* 38 (2010).

⁵⁴ Amikam Elad, in his comments on a draft of this paper, makes a compelling argument that this was actually ʿAbd al-Wahhāb b. ʿAlī b. Muḥammad (al-Mahdī) b. ʿAbdallāh (al-Manṣūr) who led the family to Samarra and not the ʿAbd al-Wahhāb whom Bosworth identified in his translation of al-Ṭabarī. See Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Taʾrīkh madīnati as-salām*, ed. B. A. Maʿrouf (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 2001), v. 12, 282. I thank Amikam for pointing this out to me.

⁵⁵ Nawas, “All in the Family?”

⁵⁶ al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1104.

⁵⁷ al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh*, v. 2, 423. Again, I thank Amikam Elad for this reference.

contemporaneous readers. Thus these must have been two separate provisions, but one is left with the unsettling perception that perhaps they were not.

And finally point thirteen: be kind to the ‘Alids. It was a general admonishment without any specific recommendations and was to be expected from al-Maʿmūn. The text of the will then moved to its conclusion with a quote from the Qurʾān (3:102). It is odd that, for a man obsessed with the Qurʾān (compare to al-Maʿmūn’s *Miḥna* letters), this was the only reference to scripture in the whole of the document. Al-Muʿtaṣim was told to “fear God” and rule as a good Muslim. The text ends with a plea for the forgiveness of al-Maʿmūn’s sins. Next at the age of forty-eight or forty-nine years old⁵⁸ he died, and al-ʿAbbās and al-Muʿtaṣim took the body to Tarsus for burial. Al-Ṭabarī and al-Yaʿqūbī both reported that al-Muʿtaṣim and not al-ʿAbbās prayed over him.⁵⁹

The Background to the Will

To elucidate the implications of the will, let us turn to the broader context for this succession. The war between the brothers al-Amīn and al-Maʿmūn (194–198/809–813) had caused a severe breakdown in the authority of the center. An important repercussion of this war for the dynasty was the dramatic rift within the ʿAbbāsīd family itself that left al-Maʿmūn bereft of meaningful familial support.⁶⁰ After al-Maʿmūn had won the war, but before he returned to the capital in 204/819, the elite of the capital, including his family members, seriously misbehaved. Their behavior improved slightly in his presence, but al-Maʿmūn became increasingly reliant on those who had come from Marw with him, most visibly Ṭāhir b. al-Husayn and his kin. Of the ʿAbbāsīds, the only one that he seems to have relied on and to have received important support and help from was his younger brother, Abū Ishāq, the future al-Muʿtaṣim. Ismāʿīl al-Bīlī asserts that, as al-Muʿtaṣim was not part of the factional politics of their father’s court and not really of the faction of al-Amīn, this must have made him an attractive supporter for al-

Maʿmūn.⁶¹ He goes on to argue that al-Muʿtaṣim was al-Maʿmūn’s “right hand man,” and that this does not seem to have provoked a rivalry between al-ʿAbbās and his uncle. From this he extrapolates that the issue of succession did not arise between the two, as everyone was too busy. I find this hard to accept. Succession struggles were the defining narrative for all of the Caliphs from the beginning. Al-Muʿtaṣim was essential to al-Maʿmūn’s plans—but then again, so were al-ʿAbbās, the Ṭāhirids, and al-Maʿmūn’s other generals.

Another important consequence of the fourth *fitna* was the profoundly negative effect it had on the stability and discipline of the army. The imperial army of the metropole had been defeated and al-Maʿmūn’s new army (with elements of the old) had stepped into its place but could not do so completely.⁶² He tried his best to co-opt the *abnāʾ al-dawla* but was reluctant, with good reason, to rely on them. The years 204–218/819–833 were a period of reconstruction and reconsolidation of the empire. Thus, the bulk of al-Maʿmūn’s reign was engaged in restoring control.⁶³ It was mostly successful except in regards to the ʿAbbāsīd family and with a few trouble spots like Bābak’s Khurramiyya.

Thus 218/833 would have been a propitious time for al-Muʿtaṣim to remove al-Maʿmūn. The disruptions had abated enough so that al-Muʿtaṣim could stage a coup without worrying about destroying the whole empire. Upon winning the war against al-Amīn, one of the first things that al-Maʿmūn had to do was to make his army into an imperial army.⁶⁴ Al-Maʿmūn’s army under Ṭāhir was strong enough to set about restoring order and reintegrating the Caliphate, but he needed others to avoid becoming too dependent on any one general. One need only recall the position of Abū Muslim to recognize the predicament. For this, he turned to his brother who had been actively creating a private guard of servile origins. Given the chaos of Baghdad from the siege until al-Maʿmūn’s arrival

⁶¹ O. S. Ismāʿīl al-Bīlī, *Prelude to the Generals* (Reading, UK, 2001), 33.

⁶² For further details on this army, see A. Elad, “Mawālī in the Composition of al-Maʿmūn’s Army: a Non-Arab Takeover?,” in *Patronate and Patronage in Early and Classical Islam*, ed. M. Bernards and J. A. Nawas (Leiden, 2005); A. Elad, “The Armies of al-Maʿmūn in Khurāsān (193–202/809–817–18),” *Oriens* 38 (2010). Also see H. Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs* (New York, 2001), 118.

⁶³ H. Kennedy, “The Decline and Fall of the First Muslim Empire,” *Der Islam* 81 (2004): 4.

⁶⁴ See Gordon, *Breaking of a Thousand Swords*, 30.

⁵⁸ This, in an interesting parallel, was roughly the same age at which his father, his brother al-Muʿtaṣim, and his nephew al-Mutawakkil would die. Al-Wāthiq would die before the age of forty, confirming the trend of early death in the family.

⁵⁹ al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1140. al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh*, v. 2, 429.

⁶⁰ For more see Nawas, “All in the Family?”

seven years later in 204/819, this was likely initially a private bodyguard prudently hired for protection during an almost total breakdown of law and order. This force would, in time, grow, but would never be very large. Ītākh, Waṣīf and Ashinās, the top rank of the first generation of the Samarran elite, were purchased at this time. It is important to note that this was not a proper army of the imperium, nor was it intended to be. Al-Yaʿqūbī tells us that al-Muʿtaṣim had 3,000 slave soldiers (*ghilman*) by the end of al-Maʿmūn’s reign.⁶⁵ While large, this was his personal guard and not a field army. Ultimately, it reinforced his power over a ruling elite who would never organize effectively enough to defeat or eliminate them.

Gordon has argued that at first these soldiers were somewhat ceremonial.⁶⁶ For example, upon entering Baghdad for the first time as Caliph, al-Yaʿqūbī tells us that al-Muʿtaṣim equipped his guard with “gilded silk brocade,”⁶⁷ thus marking them off as special. While their “ceremonial” purpose can be debated, al-Muʿtaṣim had had some success against the *kharijites* as Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī’s agent during the chaos of Baghdad at the beginning of al-Maʿmūn’s reign, but his troops had not really been tested. Being chosen by Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī for that task indicates nothing more than that he had a moderately organized force in a time when there were few of those at hand.

In 214/829–830, al-Muʿtaṣim was sent to Egypt to put down a rebellion for al-Maʿmūn.⁶⁸ He did so, but the province erupted in revolt once again in the next year and al-Maʿmūn had to go personally; with the aid of al-Afshīn, he restored order.⁶⁹ This, in itself, was hardly an unusual occurrence; however, one could draw the inference that al-Muʿtaṣim’s troops were neither dominant nor numerous enough to operate in two theaters simultaneously. This is the reason why: at the beginning of his own reign, these troops were

not deployed against the Zuṭṭ (219/834) and only in a logistical capacity against Bābak.⁷⁰ ʿAbdallāh b. Ṭāhir subdued the ʿAlid rebel Muḥammad b. Qāsim. At the same time, ʿUjayf b. ʿAnbasa was sent successfully against the Zuṭṭ. Next, al-Afshīn’s campaign against Bābak (219/834–222/837) emphatically established his credibility as a very good general, and Ītākh and Bughā suffered by comparison.⁷¹ In that campaign, they were deployed in a position clearly subordinate to al-Afshīn. They also come across as roundly and dangerously incompetent. Al-Muʿtaṣim’s army did not appear to be that formidable in contrast to that of ʿAbdallāh b. Ṭāhir, ʿUjayf, and al-Afshīn.⁷² If one considers this description, then why al-Muʿtaṣim did not move against al-ʿAbbās b. al-Maʿmūn, his supporters, and al-Maʿmūn’s men immediately upon his rise to the throne is quite obvious. His guard did not have the prestige to be the dominant elite of the army of the Caliph. In addition, al-Muʿtaṣim was dependent on his brother’s former generals to preserve the stability of the Empire. His Turkish guard was faced with competitors, such as al-Afshīn, who were effective and competent, yet politically suspect. Both ʿUjayf and al-Afshīn would be disgraced, humiliated and then executed shortly after their triumph and glory. The Ṭāhirids would prove to be too useful and entrenched for this treatment.⁷³

The Amorion Campaign and the Purge

Ironically, coming roughly halfway through his reign, the Amorion campaign established al-Muʿtaṣim as a *ghazi* caliph. The campaign and the subsequent purge more firmly brought the Caliphate under his control. We know more about the campaign against Amorion than practically any other.⁷⁴ We also find it glorified

⁶⁵ Aḥmad b. Abī Yaʿqūb b. Jaʿfar al-Yaʿqūbī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, ed. A. W. T. Juynboll (Leiden, 1861), 255–56.

⁶⁶ Gordon, *Breaking of a Thousand Swords*, 24.

⁶⁷ al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh*, v. 2, 430. See Gordon, *Breaking of a Thousand Swords*, 24, in which he cites al-Masʿūdī as relating the same information. Northedge notes that there is statuary and painting evidence that dressing troops in this way was not unusual. A. Northedge, *The Historical Topography of Samarra* (London, 2005), 168.

⁶⁸ al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1101.

⁶⁹ Ibid., iii, 1105. al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh*, v. 2, 423. Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr indicated that the rebels were getting the best of al-Muʿtaṣim, who needed reinforcements. Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr, *Kitāb Bagdād*, 265.

⁷⁰ Gordon speculates that Bughā’s abysmal performance could explain “why the Turkish guard was kept in Iraq. . .” Gordon, *Breaking of a Thousand Swords*, 76.

⁷¹ al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1171–82, 1187–1234.

⁷² Ayalon notes that in spite of generally unimpressive results, the *mamlūk* troops were preferred for their “military superiority;” he is certainly correct, and the position of Ītākh and Bughā highlight this; Ayalon, “Military Reforms,” 25.

⁷³ Given the hints and allegations surrounding al-Afshīn that he was after the Ṭāhirid domains, perhaps with some encouragement from the court, it is not a far reach to suspect that such a gambit was in the offing but proved unsuccessful with al-Afshīn bearing the full brunt of retribution for the failure.

⁷⁴ It is interesting that al-Afshīn’s campaign against Bābak is the other campaign that we know the most about. In fact, al-Ṭabarī

in Abū Tammām's famous *Qaṣīda*.⁷⁵ One problem with all of that is that the campaign really was not worthy of the accolades. It was a relatively minor and fleeting victory. It received such notice because of the internal propaganda value it yielded for the Caliph. It provided "proof" that the Caliph was a legitimate *ghazī*, or at the very least as legitimate as his brother and more so than his nephew. It also proved that his Turks were a capable and competent field army and not just a personal guard. Al-Afshīn, in spite of having met, fought and defeated the Byzantine Emperor on his way to Ankara, was virtually ignored in the account as a battlefield commander.⁷⁶ The campaign on Amorion, despite its minimal impact, was a major logistical operation. It began in 223/838 with a great deal of preparation. Al-Afshīn was in charge of the northern prong of a prolonged pincers movement converging first on Ankara and then Amorion. Al-Mu'taṣim with Ītākḥ and Ashinās commanded the southern prong. The attack did not necessarily go as planned, but in the end Amorion was taken after a relatively short siege.

The turn of events after this point, as related by al-Ṭabarī, is confused. It is a strange and sordid tale indeed and one that stretches credulity. The narrative comes to a head with al-'Abbās getting drunk with the Caliph and naming names of his supporters who had planned to kill al-Mu'taṣim and his Turkish generals, so that they then could be arrested and executed.⁷⁷ Those who had been fingered, along with al-'Abbās himself, were shackled and each was killed in a creative manner. Among these, 'Ujayf and al-'Abbās were given very salty food while water was withheld. They subsequently died of dehydration, which in al-'Abbās's case was hurried along by being wrapped in a felt

blanket in the heat of the day.⁷⁸ 'Ujayf was executed by the Ṭāhirid Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm, while al-Afshīn personally dispatched al-'Abbās. Having them die of thirst instead of by other means left no visible marks of abuse. This choice was not an indicator of status but of an interest in covering the tracks of the executioners. This provided them with plausible deniability, but more importantly protected those who carried out the orders from prosecution for that killing: they might be held responsible for neglect but not for murder.⁷⁹ Al-Mu'taṣim went so far as to have al-'Abbās's four brothers by his mother Sundus imprisoned by Ītākḥ.⁸⁰ They died of unspecified causes in his basement. As for the others, 'Amr al-Farghānī was beaten severely and then buried alive;⁸¹ Al-Shāh b. Sahl was decapitated; and Ahmad b. al-Khalīl was thrown into a pit in Samarra as a prison that, after some time, his jailors (under orders) tried to fill with water.⁸² It did not work because the ground absorbed all of the water, so they had to take him out. The manner of his death is not recorded, but as it took a number of days, one is safe in assuming that it probably took the same form as the murders of 'Ujayf and al-'Abbās.

In addition, an unnamed Turk killed himself with a knife smuggled into his prison.⁸³ This, along with the note that Turks were among the unnamed officers purged, raises an important point that the limiting factor was not ethnicity.⁸⁴ This was a purge of al-Ma'mūn's supporters, neither only al-'Abbās's nor only the non-Turkish elements.⁸⁵ According to al-

devoted many more pages to it than to the Amorion campaign, yet it receives less attention.

⁷⁵ J. Bray, "Al-Mu'taṣim's 'Bridge of Toil' and Abū Tammām's Amorion *Qaṣīda*," in *Studies in Islamic and Middle Eastern Texts and Traditions in Memory of Norman Calder*, ed. A. Samely, G. R. Hawting, and J. A. Mojaddedi (Oxford, 2000). S. P. Stetkevych, *Abū Tammām and the Poetics of the 'Abbāsīd Age* (Leiden, 1991).

⁷⁶ Khalīfa Ibn Khayyāt al-'Uṣfurī, *Ta'rikḥ Khalīfa Ibn Khayyāt*, ed. M. N. Fawwaz and H. K. Fawwaz (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiya, 1995), 316–17. al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikḥ*, iii, 1242–44. The Byzantine sources do not neglect this defeat: see W. T. Treadgold, "The Chronological Accuracy of the 'Chronicle' of Symeon the Logothete for the Years 813–845," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 33 (1979): 184. I owe this reference to Etienne de la Vaissiere.

⁷⁷ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikḥ*, iii, 1263–64.

⁷⁸ However, al-Dhahabī in his brief note for al-'Abbās stated that he died in the year 224 after having gone into rebellion in 223. al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikḥ*, volume for the years 221–30, 217. He repeated al-Ṭabarī's version with the information about the coup. Interestingly he did not include it in the *Siyar*. Al-Azdī says that al-'Abbās was killed at Manbij and then 'Ujayf after him. al-Azdī, *Ta'rikḥ al-Mawṣil*, 427. They were killed at the same time when safely away from the frontier. Al-Mas'ūdī barely mentioned that al-Mu'taṣim imprisoned him. His death was recorded without mention of cause. al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, v. 4, 55.

⁷⁹ J. Lassner, *The Middle East Remembered* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2000), 241. Kennedy argues that non-marking executions will become the norm for high status victims. Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled*, 238–39.

⁸⁰ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikḥ*, iii, 1267. The names of the four brothers are given in al-Azdī, *Ta'rikḥ al-Mawṣil*, 428.

⁸¹ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikḥ*, iii, 1265.

⁸² *Ibid.*, iii, 1266–67.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, iii, 1266.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, iii, 1267.

⁸⁵ Ismā'īl said "Ya'qūbī reports that he kept al-Ma'mūn's men in the administration for only three months and then dismissed

Ṭabarī, there were two cases of clemency and one case of state’s evidence. Al-Hārith al-Samarqandī was one of the original plotters, but was spared because he bore witness against al-ʿAbbās.⁸⁶ Harthama b. Naḍr al-Khuttalī lived through the intercession of al-Afshīn.⁸⁷ We see nothing more of him in this source. The other, al-Sindī b. Bukhtāsha, had his name cleared after his arrest.⁸⁸ This is last we hear of him, as well. The *Fragmenta* tells us that seventy were killed in all.⁸⁹

By any calculus, the purge was massive. In spite of its size, we should note that even when al-Muʿtaṣim did make his move in initiating it, he only pursued some of the high-ranking officers and not their subordinates.⁹⁰ The rank-and-file stood by and let it happen because they were paid generously and were flush with the booty of Amorion. Al-Yaʿqūbī tells us that al-ʿAbbās had 116,000 dinars with him when he was arrested.⁹¹ Presumably this was to pay for the plot. Al-Muʿtaṣim confiscated the money and then distributed it among the troops. Each soldier received two dinars with the Caliph resolving a shortfall out of his own pocket. One can never really know for sure, but as al-Ṭabarī tells it, the narrative was very convenient for al-Muʿtaṣim’s purposes.

It also makes sense. As these events took place on the frontier, no one in the capital was in a position to gainsay it and those who survived the purge had little incentive to. In addition, eliminating officers after the troops had been well-paid and were on their way home was less likely to have sparked a revolt than at some other point. Gordon interprets the purge of the coup plotters and the removal of al-Afshīn as leaving a vacuum that the Turkish guards were left to fill. This it did. However, given the events of the succession and the contrivances in the narrative of the purge, it is not a stretch to say that al-Muʿtaṣim created the vacuum on purpose and that its focus was not merely to promote the Turkish guard but also to break the

them all.” Ismāʿīl al-Bīlī, *Prelude to the Generals*, 84–85. I have been unable to track his reference down in the editions of al-Yaʿqūbī’s *Taʾrīkh* that I have. If this is true, then this is a startling bolster to my theory.

⁸⁶ al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1264.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, iii, 1267.

⁸⁸ Tentative reading of the name following Bosworth. Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Storm and Stress along the Northern Frontiers of the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate*, trans. C. E. Bosworth, vol. 33 (Albany, NY, 1991), 132.

⁸⁹ De Goeje, *Fragmenta*, v. 1, 398.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* The source reads “*al-quwwād wa-l-ʿumarāʾ*?”

⁹¹ al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh*, v. 2, 437.

back of residual loyalty to al-Maʿmūn and al-ʿAbbās. Whatever the instigation, he benefitted immensely from it. Khalifa b. Khayyat’s account is informative in this regard:

And in the year 223/838 the Commander of the Faithful Abū Ishāq al-Muʿtaṣim bi-llah set off at the head of a great multitude. And so he penetrated deeply into the land of the Byzantines and al-Afshīn Khaydhar b. Kāwus approached and encountered the Tyrant (Byzantine Emperor) . . . And so he (al-Afshīn) defeated him and he killed 4000 of his companions [i.e., soldiers]. The Commander of the Faithful set off (again) and alighted near ʿAmūriyya [Amorion] and al-Afshīn came to him. Thus the Commander of the Faithful captured it forcibly on Tuesday with thirteen days remaining in the month of Ramadan (August 9, 838). And so a great many were killed and a great many were taken prisoner and he destroyed the city and he razed it. And before the Commander of the Faithful arrived at ʿAmūriyya he destroyed what he passed by of their villages and the Byzantines fled in all directions. And in it (223) he destroyed Ankara then the Commander of the Faithful turned his face homewards on Saturday with nine days remaining in the month of Ramadan. And then he cut off the heads of 4000 of the prisoners and he still continued to kill the prisoners on his journey and to burn until he entered the lands of Islam. And in it (223) the Commander of the Faithful brought forth the unbeliever Bābak. And so he commanded that his hands and feet be cut off. Then he cut his head off and gibbeted him and this was in Ṣafar of the year 223.⁹²

The first thing one notes about Ibn Khayyat’s account is the jumbling of events, that Ankara was captured after Amorion. The details but not this order are well-attested elsewhere. However, there is something more important missing. He mentions neither a coup attempt nor succession troubles of any sort.⁹³ Granted, his account is generally sparse, but one would expect such a major occurrence to make an appearance. Remember also that Ibn Qutayba’s account mentioned

⁹² al-ʿUṣfurī, *Taʾrīkh*, 316–17.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 315. In his note for the end of al-Maʿmūn’s reign, he merely mentioned the date of al-Maʿmūn’s death without any reference to al-ʿAbbās at all. Also al-ʿUṣfurī, *Taʾrīkh*, 317.

a purge of ʿUjayf and al-ʿAbbās but no plot.⁹⁴ As well, al-Dīnawarī mentioned neither plot nor purge nor raid on Amorion. While this evidence is not ironclad proof, it does raise significant doubts as to whether al-ʿAbbās had really been plotting. Kennedy has noted that the narrator al-Ṭabarī used for the Amorion campaign intently wanted to “justify” the purge of al-ʿAbbās and his supporters.⁹⁵ Elsewhere, he had written that the narrative sought to bolster al-Muʿtaṣim’s army, to “stress their competence and loyalty, in contrast to the followers of al-ʿAbbās who are shown as undermining the military effort.”⁹⁶ Perhaps al-ʿAbbās was plotting—and there is significant evidence for this—but whether he was or not, this served as a convenient pretext for clearing the decks of the “old guard,” those who had supported al-Maʾmūn. By killing al-ʿAbbās and his brothers, he eliminated the potential for a Maʾmūnid restoration.⁹⁷ This in turn argues that whether or not there was a real plot is almost irrelevant to the fact that a purge was inevitable. Al-Muʿtaṣim did not want to upset the recentralization that had been achieved by al-Maʾmūn after the fourth *fitna* and thus did not remove al-ʿAbbās immediately upon his succession to the throne; another open civil war, and the situation would have been irretrievable; the entire edifice of the Caliphate would have been rent asunder.

Conclusions and Tying Up Loose Ends

The Amorion campaign and the subsequent purge resolved two lingering issues left over from the death of al-Maʾmūn. First was the problem of al-ʿAbbās and those inclined to support him; and second, al-Muʿtaṣim’s legitimacy as holder of the office of the Caliph. The purge, whether al-ʿAbbās was plotting or not, solved one issue, but it could not be dealt with until the second issue had been resolved; a great and highly publicized victory would do quite nicely. Even if it was not a terribly consequential one, leaving few residual effects in terms of the war with the Byzantines, it was enough to have Abū Tammām’s poem ring loudly. The effect of the purge and subsequent removal of al-Afshīn, which assuredly was part of this

process, was to force al-Muʿtaṣim into ever-greater reliance on his Turkish forces.⁹⁸ As such, the over-reliance on the Turkish forces came as a result of the purge and not vice-versa. It was not a purge in favor of elevating the Turks, but one intended to eliminate opposition to al-Muʿtaṣim. The side effect was that Ibn Abī Duʿād and the Turkish officers became king-makers long before the elevation of al-Mutawakkil to the throne.

According to al-Ṭabarī, al-Muʿtaṣim died as the result of a cupping gone wrong.⁹⁹ Interestingly, Ibn Māsawayh, the doctor whom al-Ṣulī accused of malfeasance in the death of al-Maʾmūn, is said to have also committed gross malpractice resulting in the death of al-Muʿtaṣim.¹⁰⁰ Further, al-Wāthiq suffered from edema, which was relieved through the application of heat, and thus he died as a result of being left in an oven (*tannūr*) too long, while Ahmad b. Abī Duʿād, Ibn al-Zayyāt, Umar b. Faraj and al-Faḍl b. Iṣḥāq al-Hāshimī stood by—three of whom would be part of the cabal that selected al-Mutawakkil.¹⁰¹ Al-Ṭabarī furthered the suspiciousness of that episode by including a brief alternate version, which had Ibn Abī Duʿād alone with him when he was overcome by the heat. One does not have to stretch far to see this as a murder.¹⁰² The circumstances surrounding al-Maʾmūn’s

⁹⁸ For more, see Gordon, *Breaking of a Thousand Swords*, chapters 2 and 3. Al-Afshīn appeared in the purge narrative rather prominently as a defender of al-Muʿtaṣim. He was one of the few of al-Maʾmūn’s generals to do so, and thus had to be dealt with in another way at another time; hence his trial in 225/840. For his trial, see J. P. Turner, “Al-Afshīn, Heretic, Rebel or Rival?” in *Abbasid Studies II*, ed. Nawas.

⁹⁹ al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1323.

¹⁰⁰ Ibn Abī Uṣaybīʿa, *ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ*, 211. Also noted by al-Ṭabarī, *Storm and Stress*, 207, n. 609.

¹⁰¹ al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1363. Al-Yaʿqūbī described it as a pit in the ground “like an oven (*tannūr*) then heated by tamarisk wood.” al-Yaʿqūbī, *Taʾrīkh*, v. 2, 446. al-Yaʿqūbī also stated that the oath of allegiance was taken for his son while he was still alive. El-Hibri briefly discusses al-Wāthiq but does not dwell on the manner of his death. T. El-Hibri, “The Image of the Caliph al-Wāthiq: a Riddle of Religious and Historical Significance,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 19 (2001). For more discussion of his reign, see J. P. Turner, “The Enigmatic Reign of al-Wāthiq (r. 227/842–232/847),” in *Abbasid Studies IV: Occasional Papers of the School of Abbasid Studies*, ed. M. Bernards (forthcoming).

¹⁰² Going further afield, one might note that Ibn al-Zayyāt was given credit for creating the *tannūr*, a torture device similar to an iron maiden. Could this be a subtle way of saying that al-Wāthiq was tortured to death? There is no way to know, but the possibility does raise questions. I thank James Montgomery for helping me to see this possibility. For more, see Turner, “The End of the Miḥna,” 93.

⁹⁴ Ibn Qutayba, *al-Maʿārif*, 392.

⁹⁵ Kennedy, *Armies of the Caliphs*, 133.

⁹⁶ H. Kennedy, “Caliphs and Their Chroniclers in the Middle Abbasid Period (Third/Ninth Century),” in *Texts, Documents and Artefacts*, ed. C. F. Robinson (Leiden, 2003), 25–26.

⁹⁷ For a different take on the possibilities of a Maʾmūnid restoration, see Nawas, “All in the Family?”

death as noted at the beginning were equally suspicious. Importantly, Ibn Abī Duʿād was present for all three deaths. According to al-Dīnawarī, he led the prayers over al-Muʿtaṣim.¹⁰³ It is odd that the son, heir, and new Caliph, al-Wāthiq, did not do that. Ibn Abī Duʿād led the prayers over al-Wāthiq as well.

The purge was a successful consolidation of power, but it left al-Muʿtaṣim in a vulnerable position. He was able, due to the personal loyalty of the first generation of Turkish commanders, to maintain control in Samarra. When he died, Ibn Abī Duʿād in conjunction with that first generation was left in charge of the state and its new, young ruler. Ashinās, Ītākh, Waṣīf, Ibn al-Zayyāt and Ibn Abī Duʿād were the power behind al-Wāthiq, and it was they who chose al-Mutawakkil. They “managed the succession” and they took care of the business of ruling.¹⁰⁴ However, they were unable to completely control al-Wāthiq, who, in engaging in a building program in Samarra, converting it from camp into a city,¹⁰⁵ was probably trying to curry favor with

the Turkish elite and thereby gain more independence of action.

I posit that it was for this that Ibn Abī Duʿād murdered him. He was unable to control the succession and had to acknowledge Waṣīf’s objection that al-Wāthiq’s minor son was too obviously a puppet.¹⁰⁶ He hit upon the idea of placing the young al-Mutawakkil on the throne but did not count on his canny will for independence. Al-Mutawakkil was able to break free from him and the clique that had installed him, but in doing so exacerbated his condition of dependence in Samarra. In the end, this consumed him, and the fence holding the Turkish forces at bay and under control was smashed. In the end, internal dynastic concerns were what thrust the Turkish guard to the front and center as the power base for the Caliphs. Meanwhile, the internal wrangling over control of al-Wāthiq and al-Mutawakkil by Ahmad b. Abī Duʿād, Ibn al-Zayyāt and the Turkish commanders left no one solidly in charge.

¹⁰³ al-Dīnawarī, *al-akhbār*, 401.13. al-ʿUsfurī, *Taʾrīkh*, 317, confirms some of the details given by al-Dīnawarī. Al-Ṭabarī gave no indication of anyone praying over al-Muʿtaṣim.

¹⁰⁴ Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled*, 231.

¹⁰⁵ Gordon, *Breaking of a Thousand Swords*, 78–79. For more on the specifics of his building, see Northedge, *The Historical Topography of Samarra*, 99–100.

¹⁰⁶ al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, iii, 1368.